The Third Men

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The Third Men

by The_Clever_Magpie (Metal_mako_dragon)

Summary

“Do you...” Jeff felt like a shit for asking, but his curiosity won out, “do you miss him?”

“Parts of me,” Will said, curling his arms around his middle, “he’s my...I mean he’s my mate. Of course I fucking do. I miss him like a fucking limb.”

Will always swore easily and casually when he was drunk. Normally it made Jeff smile just to see all his uptight-ness and messy social awkwardness come out in familiar curses. This time, not so much.

A set of companion timestamps for 'Il Faut Souffrir Pour Etre Beau', written for LovelyLeniece who wanted another look into the character of Jeffrey Milo. This will be a set of slices of he and Will through the years, and beyond.

Epistle

Chapter Summary

> Taking the last chance to kiss him, a slow and soft press of lips, before he woke Will gently.
>
> "Aspirin," was the first word he said to Will's bleary eyes, searching the room, narrowed in pain, "and water, on the table."
> "Thank you," Will said croakily, fumbling the tablets and water.
>
> And everything fell back to normal, and Jeff had no choice but to accept it.

"You've heard of him, right?" Will was talking as he unscrewed the engine cap, a concentrative frown in place on his forehead, "Hannibal Lecter?"

It had been a surreal afternoon. Two weeks before Eleanor's first birthday, ten and a half months since they'd first met, and nearly seven months since *that night*, Will had finally brought it up. Standing in Will's garage as he tinkered with bits of his car Jeff couldn't name, picking out pieces of metal and laying them out on an oily, stained towel on his workbench, he hadn't known quite what to say.

"Yeah," was what finally came out, "yeah I have."

"Well, there you go," Will had replied.

"There I go? That really it?"

"You want more?" Will asked with a look that told him he was really asking for it if he said yes.

"Well..." he'd floundered for a moment, because he'd been surprised at how big the part of him was that wanted to say, "yeah. I mean, hell, we're really gonna be dancing on eggshells if you don't ever talk about it now you've brought it up, right?"

And Will had laughed, genuine and rather surreally considering their topic of conversation. Looking down under the hood he leaned in and went silent.

Because it had been a long time since anything had happened between them, but that hadn't meant they weren't in touch. Touch, just not *touch*. And Jeff had decided that was enough, because Will was a fucking good guy and he liked watching shit films with him while his wife was away and laughing over stupid stuff and the long, thoughtful silences they could fall into without feeling awkward and listening to Will get carried away without realising as he started enthusing about anything from fishing techniques to blood spatter analysis.

And Jeff didn't mind because it was nice, no *good*, to feel that enthusiasm for someone again. Even if he did love his wife.

Even if he did love his beautiful, talented, fiery, cheeky, angry wife.

Fuck.

Jeff listened to the baby monitor on the workbench as the lights lit up to the sound of '*Ba-ba-da-da woooo wy wy wy'* ,accompanied by the sound of plastic pages ruffling as Eleanor played with her puffy book in her cot where they'd left her fifteen minutes ago. The sound of something clanging to the floor, ringing out, had Will cursing softly. When he remerged he had a smudge of grease across his left cheek that Jeff nearly reached up to wipe off without thinking.

Fuck my fucking life, he thought.

"Well, I don't really know what to tell you," Will began, wiping his hands thoroughly on a rag as he kept his eyes on the car.

"I mean, I heard about it at the time," Jeff offered, "Don't think there's many that haven't. Hannibal the Cannibal. It was everywhere for weeks, hell, they still show specials on all the crime channels. You know, the sensationalised ones."

"Oh yeah," Will snorted, "I know."

"Never heard your name come up though. Did they..?"

"My boss," Will offered when Jeff left the sentence hanging, "he did his best to keep the media off me. Easier, you know, being omega. Gets you out of lots of uncomfortable situations if you just bring it up," Will looked as if he was both appreciative and unappreciative of the fact simultaneously; when he looked up he caught Jeff's stare and began to talk without warning, "in the end he was convicted of killing thirty five people. They say he didn't while we were together but personally I think that's a lot of shit. I knew him for three years and two months, we were married for two years and five months, and it was the happiest I've ever been in my life. Then he tried to kill me in our kitchen when they found him out and it took a sniper bullet through both of us to stop him."

Staring was all he could do after Will stopped. It had been a mechanical recitation, as if Will was used to making it, or just had it rehearsed in case it needed hauling out for nosy people who wanted to know. *Now that's you*, Jeff accused himself, *you're the nosy fucking person.*

"Well," was all he could say, "ok. I mean...well..."

He stopped before he said anything stupid from all he'd heard or read about it, that *loads of psychologists said he wasn't trying to kill you*, or *did he know you were pregnant?*,or *have you really not spoken to him in all this time?* It wasn't any of his business and he knew that, it was just that sometimes, when he didn't watch himself, he felt Will was his business. There was an itching need to protect him, even while his curiosity squirmed about like maggots in a wound.

“Whatever it is,” Will said unthinkingly, scratching at his neck, “I’ve been asked it before. Just spit it out.”

“No, I’m pretty sure that’s not what I want to do to you right now,” Jeff smiled.

Will stopped short, seeming a little surprised. He fidgeted for a moment, seeming unsure whether to put the rag down or keep it in his hands or run for the hills. Then he looked up, catching his eye momentarily.

“Thanks,” he said, nodding as he looked away.

“Oh shut up,” Jeff grinned, “trying to make me back off now? Come on, get cleaned up and I’ll run us into town to get cake stuff. You do still need flour and icing sugar right?”

“Yeah. And candles. Well, *candle*.”

“Ok, I’m ready when you are.”

And he didn’t push, because he knew he didn’t have to. Will always talked on his own time, and Jeff knew he didn’t mind giving him that time. They hadn’t talked about a lot of things, *like that night*, but Jeff knew it would just take time. Will always took his own time to do anything.

“I think she would have loved it,” Will said as they both sat back from the table, plates clean, and looked to Eleanor in her high chair, “if she could eat it.”

The cake had been surprisingly easy. No panicking, no rushing for instructions with messy hands on a clean laptop like Jeff normally did when he tried to do things from scratch. Just one simple step after another, with Will working by rote as he creamed the butter and sugar till perfectly stiff and pale, made the sponge mix like a thick paste and spread it evenly between twin tins, *because it rose more evenly the less runny it was,* and testing how cooked it was with a practiced push of an index finger to watch the golden brown puff spring back, and leaving it to cool and then decorating it with a calm, single minded precision. Just like Will did with everything else.

Even if, over the past few days, Will had been a little off. He couldn’t put his finger on it, not completely, but he’d been terser than usual. Not as willing to forgive anything that annoyed him, that he would usually just avoid or ignore. Will hadn’t explained, and Jeff hadn’t asked. Again, he knew it would come on its own, given time.

And anyway Will being a good cook, far better than Jeff, was something he didn’t resent because it meant he could find a good excuse to take Anthony round to Will’s for dinner.

“Like that squirt?” Jeff smiled at his little three and a half year old, pink cheeked and smeared in cake, as he busied his way through his second piece.

“Uh hu-uh,” Anthony said, mouth full, “s’really good,” his little eyes lit up and he looked Jeff in the eye, “Can-can-can mom make us cake when she come home?”

“Sure,” Jeff said, feeling a flutter of guilt; he swallowed it down and glanced up at Will. The man was busy wiping pureed apple baby food from Eleanor’s face while the little girl tried to grab at the cloth, giggling, “you can ask her.”

The guilt was still an odd, almost aborted thing. Even though he was sure it should be heavier, more overbearing. He decided it wasn’t mainly because he was trying all the excuses he could, *it was just once,* and *we were both incredibly drunk*, and *it was just sex and nothing else*, and they all came up slightly stale. Not untrue, because they were, they were true, just that none of them sat quite right.

And especially when, some nights, he knew he’d woken from dreams that did not involve his wife. Or even another woman.

Just nights where he was alone and Susan was out with friends or away on research or visiting her parents, and he’d be lying in bed, horny as hell, and he’d start with the fantasy that maybe Susan had come home early to surprise him, or that cute omega waitress at the seafood restraunt down at the quay who just set him off for no real reason was there, smiling, but by the end of it all, as he came panting into his hand, it was always Will fucking Graham he was imagining, *his generous mouth against Jeff’s neck, his long, skilled fingers wrapped around his cock, sweet breathy moans, and the slick, tight heat of him around Jeff’s fingers as he slid another inside to stretch him wider.*

That was the guilt that he couldn’t explain away. The same guilt that had thought about wanting to fuck Will Graham senseless at least once a week ever since they’d had eager but awkward, drunken fumblings seven months ago. *And neither had mentioned again.*

Like it was right now as he sat across from him, revelling in the man’s beautiful smile as Eleanor grabbed her father’s finger and waved it as she rang out the only full words she knew ‘*bye-bye, bye-bye*’ over and over again. When Will looked up and caught his eye, he thought they both knew it, *everything left unsaid*, because he licked his lips and looked down at the table, scratching his neck with his free hand.

“Well,” Jeff said, trying to clear the air as he leaned over and kissed Eleanor’s bouncy halo of brown curls, “happy birthday little girl.”

“Yeah! Happy birfday to yo-ou! Happy *birfday* to y-ou,” Anthony crooned to a half-baked melody, making Jeff laugh, “happy *birfday, happy* birfday*,* birfday birfday birfda-ay.”

“Something like that,” Jeff said, “ok. Come on. Want to watch some cartoons?” Jeff looked back to Will, “I brought over that thing Elle liked last time, with that really annoying song in it.”

“Oh gee, thanks so much,” Will said sarcastically, even as his daughter decided to pop her dad’s finger in her mouth and start chewing, “*ah*, Elle. She’s just started teething. Driving her crazy. Would you mind not using my finger for that? Here.”

He picked up her brightly coloured teething ring and managed to do a quick swap for his now distinctly wet and slightly red finger. The just-turned-toddler blinked and grabbed the ring in chubby hands, continuing her fitful chewing.

They cleaned up and then sat on the couch together, Anthony paying attention to the television for about five minutes before he began running around and playing with whatever things he had left here over the past couple of weeks; a small set of trucks that were steadily losing wheels and a brontosaurus he'd bought him from the science museum last time they'd all gone there, Susan pointing out the birds to Anthony and naming them one by one.

Eleanor clapped her hands and wiggle-danced to the music on her father's knee, making Will smile fondly. Jeff didn't even remember drifting off.

It was later, indefinably later because truthfully Jeff had totally lost track of time, that Will shook him awake. Well, prodded him awake. Will wasn't one to make bodily contact long enough for a shake.

"Shit..." Jeff, half asleep, hesitated and shook his head; he never swore around the kids, but the living room was quiet. He could hear something from Eleanor's bedroom, the sound of a tape playing, "what time is it?"

"Just after five."

"Sorry. I must have been more tired than I thought."

"It's not a problem," Will seemed to fidget, blinking a little too often, his hands going to his hips, then together to rub, then his hips again, "I have stuff to make carbonara, if you and Anthony want dinner."

"No," he said on impulse, but that seemed to be the wrong answer because Will, aware of the reaction or not, tightened his fingers into his shirt above the waistband of his jeans until his knuckles showed white. Jeff quickly recalculated, "because, I mean you made everything else today. Why don't you let me get dinner?"

"It's all in the fridge. It'll go bad if I don't use it."

"Oh, ok. Well, yeah, I mean want me to help out?"

"No, that's fine. Just get some rest."

"I'm ok, really," Jeff said, waving him away, "just a few night's bad sleep."

Still, he let Will do what he wanted, because he wanted to make it easier on Will and forcing the man into social norms only served to ratchet up the tension. And so dinner was had half an hour later, *delicious and consummate as always,* and then everything had progressed naturally back to the living room where they'd watched some mindless show about deep sea fishermen and Anthony had jumped up and down every time they caught something big and crazy like a swordfish or a marlin, and Jeff had been more than aware of the fact that Will hadn't paid attention to a single word of it.

Anthony fell asleep at seven o'clock and Jeff took him to the single bed beside Eleanor, already snoozing in her cot. The bed Will sometimes used when he couldn't stand being in the main bedroom, too far from his pup.

When he came back, Will was in the kitchen looking through the cupboards. Several stood open, some with bottles and packets removed to litter the counters. Jeff stood, watching him, before Will explained without even glancing his direction. He looked distracted and on edge.

"I don't have anything to drink. Could have sworn I kept a bottle of bourbon here somewhere, but haven't seen it in months. Hell knows what I've done with it."

"Need a drink, huh?"

"Need that statement qualified, do you?" Will said back sharply.

"Not really," Jeff acquiesced, "just give me five minutes and I'll go see what I've got in the house."

When Jeff came back, with whiskey and rum and a few mixers in a thick material shopping bag, Will was standing on his back porch with something in his hands. He couldn't quite see from this angle, as Will was hunched over, elbows against the wooden balustrade. He set out the bottles on the coffee table in Will's small living room, and put on a few of the lights as the evening gloom set in against the walls.

"Hey," he called out, not too loudly so as not to wake the kids, "I got rum and whiskey so you can choose. I'm not gonna have anything, so go ahead, ok? I can keep an eye on..."

He stopped because he hadn't been expecting to see flames. Almost calling out was stemmed when a fluttering sheet of thick paper, curling black as it was consumed, frittered past the porch and down onto the sand. They both watched as it was blown about by the soft wind, never enough to go out. soon it split and broke and, after a few moments, was just a series of ashy stains on the yellow dunes.

"Will."

It was a little cooler out on the balcony, and he'd already pulled off his coat and hung it over one of the kitchen chairs. All he could see was Will's back, head hanging down.

"Hey, you alright?"

It took a moment to realise that was probably a stupid question. He took a few more steps, enough to get a look at the other man's face.

He wasn't crying, which was what he'd irrationally feared for a few seconds. Yet neither was he happy, or sad, or seemingly anything definable. He looked completely blank, eyes trained down onto the sand. Jeff wished it was simple, he wished he could just reach out and pat him on the back and reassure him. He knew the contact wouldn't be appreciated.

Which made Jeff wonder as to why Will had suddenly wanted a drink.

And as to what he wanted after that.

And *that* only made him realise that's what he'd been thinking.

With one long breath Will stood up, eyes seeming to refocus, before turning and walking back inside without a word. Jeff rubbed at his eyes and let out a sigh, unable to hide his frustration, at Will and himself. It was a chore, Will was always a chore, but this seemed like extra work on top of his tiredness and his confusion and his deep, churning lust.

Fuck.

"Thanks," was all he was greeted with as he entered, Will pouring himself a generous rum and coke.

"You're welcome," he said automatically; Will sat down and took a large swallow, eyes trained on the far wall. Jeff waited another few terse moments before saying, "well?"

"Well what?"

"Going to tell me what the hell all that was about?"

"It's nothing."

"Right," Jeff snorted, shaking his head, "then I'll leave you to it, shall I?"

When he turned to walk back towards the porch Will spoke up, terse but firm, "I don't want you to go."

"Well what the hell do you want, Will? Because I know you don't even want to whisper its name but the last time we did this we ended up fucking like drunk teenagers and I haven't been able to fucking *think* straight since then and yet you're happy enough to answer the door every time I come round and watch fucking television with me and go to the grocery store and take the kids out and I'm fucking married, Will, *married*. Doesn't that mean anything?"

It was only once the words were out of his mouth that he knew he was asking himself more than he was asking the tense man on the sofa. Will looked up eventually as Jeff rubbed at his face and tried to calm down, embarrassment creeping up his neck in a red blush. *Doesn't that mean anything?* Jeff wished this wasn't happening to him.

"I got a letter, a few days ago," Will said softly, interrupting his thoughts, "from...and I just..." he cleared his throat and didn't falter when Jeff's eyes skipped to him tightly, "I just read it and then I wished I hadn't and now I want to do anything but think about it. So, I don't want you to go. I know it's selfish, I know I'm a piece of shit, but I don't want you to go because you make it easier."

"I what?"

"Don't make me repeat myself."

Jeff took a long breath in through his nose and let it out. Will took two more long drinks. His tumbler was finished by the time Jeff walked back in and sat down.

“This isn’t who I am,” Jeff said, shaking his head, “I don’t lie and I don’t cheat.”

“I didn’t ask you to. I just need you to stay here.”

“Ok,” Jeff said, nodding, knowing they were lying to themselves to make it easier, “ok. I’m sorry.”

And Jeff poured himself a weak whiskey and lemonade because, despite really not wanting to leave, he needed something to take the edge off or he thought he might have a fucking coronary by the end of the night if he had to be completely, stone-cold sober.

Will was on his third drink by the time Jeff even asked.

“Is this the first?”

“The first what?” Will asked.

“Letter.”

“...Yes.”

“The first he’s sent or the first you’ve read?”

“Both.”

Silence. A few evening gulls swooped past the house, cawing at each other harshly. Jeff stretched his arms above his head to take the tension out of his shoulders.

“Been a long time. What’s that? Shit,” he said as he realised, “nearly two years. About a year and...” he counted them off on his fingers, “ten months?”

“One year eight months,” Will corrected, resting his head back against the sofa, “it was April. Early evening because the shadows were long in the room I was going to paint yellow. I bought it, even though we hadn’t agreed; five tins. I was going to do it the next two days.”

Jeff just watched him. Will’s eyes were slightly narrowed, as if in concentration, as he stared up at the ceiling. As if he were seeing something Jeff just couldn’t fathom.

“Do you...” Jeff felt like a shit for asking, but his curiosity won out, “do you miss him?”

“Parts of me,” Will said, curling his arms around his middle, “he’s my...I mean he’s my mate. Of course I fucking do. I miss him like a fucking limb.”

Will always swore easily and casually when he was drunk. Normally it made Jeff smile just to see all his uptight-ness and messy social awkwardness come out in familiar curses. This time, not so much.

“I thought we’d decided that both our futures would be the same. Turns out it wasn’t what either of us wanted. Or maybe both of us, in different ways. I...” Will licked his lips and sat forwards suddenly to pour himself another, his words becoming confused and mumbling, “Christ. Shut up, just *shut up.”*

It was the first time he’d ever seen Will act so completely unhinged since they’d met, “Will you talk about something?” he was asked.

“What do you want me to say?” Jeff asked, feeling a little lost in the face of unspoken horror.

“Anything,” Will said, rubbing his forehead with his hand, “anything. Tell me about work or some shit film you saw fucking *anything*, Jeff.”

“That gonna help?”

“Just don’t let me think about it for a while, just for a while,” Will said, his tone on the verge of pleading, and Jeff looked up to realise Will hadn’t been mixing his rum for the past couple of drinks. Just straight brown liquor from the glass.

So when he sat up and grabbed him by the shoulders Will didn’t flinch away like he would on any other day. Just blinked at him before Jeff leaned in and kissed him. Just lips against lips until Will, vibrating with unspent energy, opened his mouth and leaned forwards. Jeff swung him down onto the couch and tried for the same thing.

Just not to think for a little while; just to feel instead.

Only he was far too damn sober this time to think up helpful excuses. So as he pulled Will’s shirt up, tracing his sides as he did so, all he could thinks was, *You’re doing this because you fucking want to*. As he plunged his tongue into the other man’s willing mouth and Will pulled him closer, legs splayed wide, *You’re doing this because you fucking want to*. Will’s hands were slurry and drunk, fumbling with buttons and his mouth was becoming less and less eloquent.

“Fuck, I haven’t got any...” Jeff fumbled his shirt off as Will tugged Jeff’s boxers down over his ass, nails dragging across skin, “do you?”

“Mmm?” Will asked as he pressed his face against Jeff’s neck.

“Condoms.”

“No.”

“Will...”

“It doesn’t matter.

“You can’t just...”

“It doesn’t *matter*,” Will ground out, irritated, “Do you want to fuck me or not?”

The nervous laugh wasn't funny, though Jeff couldn't help but find it funny. Will was almost naked under him, shuffling out of his jeans and underwear, Jeff naked from the waist down under his sweaty t-shirt. He leaned down, pressing Will against the cushions. Will let out a soft, appreciative sound and shivered as Jeff spoke against his ear.

"Every fucking day since the last time, it's all I can think about," he curled his head down to breathe in the smooth, hot scent at Will's neck, "doesn't mean we shouldn't still be careful."

"You're not going to get me fucking pregnant."

"You on something?" Jeff asked, incredulous.

"There isn't anything to get pregnant," Will mumbled, an annoyed frown between his brows, "After Ellie, they took it out. It's all gone. Now stop asking stupid questions."

So he did, because it was a hell of a lot easier than thinking about the awful revelations Will was throwing out like candy wrappers. Will hooked his right leg up round Jeff's waist, while Jeff looked down between them and guided himself carefully inside.

"Fuck," he couldn't help but say as Will closed his eyes and bit at his bottom lip, "*fuck*."

It was a little clumsy on the couch, in the constricted space, balancing every so often as Will shifted to get comfortable. Jeff rolled his hips as slow and gentle as he could, until an irritated growl from Will had him laughing and giving in.

"More," Will choked out, eyes closed, "fucking *more*."

"More what, beautiful?" Jeff panted.

"More everything," Will grinned lopsidedly, cracking his eyes open.

They were a little rough, as Will pulled his nails across Jeff's back when he bit at his neck. They sped up, they ground together, Will lifted his hips and tried to meet every thrust. Jeff holding Will's hips tight enough to bruise.

Enough to push him over the edge, to make him see nothing but the man beneath him, smiling, barely coherent and begging him, *inside, please inside*.

It was a pure, hot, white moment. Jeff closed his eyes and held his face up as he came, buried deep, and Will pressed his face to Jeff's shoulder, grinding out something unintelligible as he held onto him like a vice. He felt Will come trapped between their bellies, enough to soak into his t-shirt in a damp patch.

The cooling sweat along his back tingled like rain under wet cotton. Jeff breathed evenly, slowly opening his eyes to look down. Will had his head turned to the right and down, his long lashes closed over the high blush across his cheeks. Mouth slightly parted, bottom lip bright red with biting and teasing. He was breathing evenly, and every few seconds he would wet his lips with a dart of pink tongue and frown. Eventually his eyes cracked open and he looked up from the corner.

“Lie down,” he said softly; When Jeff made to try and squeeze in beside him he shook his head and pulled at his shoulders, “on me.”

“I’ll squash you,” Jeff said automatically, making Will laugh tiredly through his nose, “I’m heavier than I look.”

“Shut up Jeff. Just do it, please.”

And so he did. Will sighed comfortably, turning his head against Jeff’s neck and nuzzling. It felt odd, to have the long hard planes of a man beneath him, not the soft, rising curves of a woman. Different was maybe better, he thought, because right now he didn’t feel odd. It felt too fucking right.

“Nice,” Will said sleepily, taking in a long breath and mumbling out, “this is nice.”

Jeff didn’t reply. He couldn’t bring himself to. When he was sure Will was asleep he stood up carefully and looked down at him. The very last of the evening light was sneaking in along the bay and in through the curtains. Will’s curls were an ordered disarray, some whorls trapped against his skin with sweat at his neck and forehead. His naked form was all milky planes and cast shadows, myriads of scars inter-cutting the smooth skin.

He looked fucking beautiful.

Rubbing his eyes didn’t help. Or his face. Jeff sighed and went to wash himself off with a cloth. When he came back Will was still deeply unconscious, his chest slowly rising and falling. Jeff cleaned him down with slow, soft drags of the cloth across his stomach, his neck, between his legs. He stirred a few times, normally just to bat away the feeling of the drying water.

Jeff brought through the duvet from the bed and tucked it around him. Then he ran his hand through Will’s hair, just once, to feel the curls tug at his fingers.

He went to sleep on Will’s bed under the spare blanket and when Eleanor started crying at three in the morning, Jeff got up dutifully and fed her.

The next morning brought sunlight and reality. Jeff had to take a few moments to realise exactly where he was when he woke, *the curtains in his bedroom were red and double lined to keep out the sun*, *his bed bigger and more central, their cupboards a wall of sliding mirrors.* Will’s curtains were white and glowing, his cupboard tall and pine, on his wall a series of messy hand paintings in primary colours in clip-frames.

Jeff sat up and took a deep breath, leaning back on his hands.

Shower.

Checking on the kids, still asleep.

Will still unconscious.

Clearing up the bottles and the spilled drink on the floor.

Looking through the fridge for breakfast.

Taking the last chance to kiss him, a slow and soft press of lips that bit at him, before he woke Will gently.

“Aspirin,” was the first word he said to Will’s bleary eyes, searching the room, narrowed in pain, “and water, on the table.”

“Thank you,” Will said croakily, fumbling the tablets and water.

And everything fell back to normal, and Jeff had no choice but to accept it. Will ate his cereal, pushing the cornflakes down into the milk with one hand while he carefully fed Elle with the other, watching her fondly. While Anthony chewed his toast and kicked his legs.

While Jeffrey Milo ate the last of the eggs scrambled, and told himself he was in love, with his wife.

Tried to tell himself this was *just sex.*

Tried to.

When he walked back home an hour later, he sat out on his porch and put his head in his hands. He thought he remembered his own voice, *this isn’t who I am, I don’t lie and I don’t cheat*. Unless of course it was to himself or everyone else around him.

“Fucking shit.”

“Daddy! Daddy look wot I found.”

“Hey squirt,” Jeff tried to look normal as he looked up to see his son climb their three stairs awkwardly, something clutched in his left hand, “what you got? Another seashell for the collection?”

“I found a secret.”

Curled and crumpled, with a blackened and wavering edge like an isobar on a map. Jeff took it with the wariness of being handed a poisonous snake.

“Is it a treasure daddy? Is it speshul?”

“No, no,” he shook his head, “you go find me a lightening whelk, yeah? You go find me one and I’ll show you where the little creature hides.”

And when he was alone, he looked down to the scrap, to the *secret, the treasure*. An ink penned cursive script, so elegant and graceful that it matched the wonderful beauty of Will in the evening light, *eyelashes over his cheeks, lips slightly parted, like a classical painting*. The

few words there like hands reaching out to try and touch that perfect form, to caress and penetrate deep and keep that bright, hot, needy connection.

And doing so, far more he was sure than Jeff ever would be able to.

Forever yours,
My dearest darling Will,

Hannibal

Felix Natalis

Chapter Summary

> Jeff cautiously held his hand up towards the dog and waited. To the sound of frying bacon and toddler's nonsense warbling and half formed words, Angel stood up and lumoxed forwards.
>
> A sniff, careful, and then a cautious lick. Jeff smiled. He didn't try for more.
>
> That one sign of acceptance was enough.

"What in the hell is it?"

"What?" Will frowned through a laugh, "What kind of question is that?"

"A pretty damn relevant one, I'd say," Jeff said as he fumbled in his pocket for his cigarettes.

"A dog Jeff. It's a dog. Think she might be a Bernese."

"Christ," Jeff shook his head as he cupped his hands round his cig and lit up while the wind blew; one strong inhale and he felt the relaxation settle down into his lungs, "it looks like an old rug."

As far as Jeff was concerned the large lump of ratty, dirty fur standing on the beach was as close to a Bernese Mountain dog as a narwhal to a unicorn. It was going to take a heck of a lot of cosmetic interference to spruce this mutt up.

"*She*," Will said pointedly, "has been mooching around here for weeks. Surprised you haven't seen her."

"Nah, not many strays round here."

"She raided my bins last night, so I gave her some leftovers."

"You fed it," Jeff said, unimpressed.

"She was starving," Will shrugged, "anyway, once you're done hiding your cigarettes from your wife on my porch, maybe you could help me give her a wash."

"A wash? I think hedge strimmers maybe, soap isn't going to do jack shit. And I'm not hiding."

"Sure, whatever you say."

Jeff took another long drag. Graham was the last person he needed shit from about this. Four years. Four *fucking* years and he hadn't touched a cigarette. Hadn't even really thought about them much, other than times of stressful deadlines or walking out the backdoor at the research institute into the cloud of student assistants, all smoking quick in their break time.

Now, now he was fucking smoking again because the bullshit he'd wrapped himself up in just to protect what little was left of his life was too much stress to deal with on a daily basis. Susan hadn't been happy, in fact she'd been shocked at first, then angry. She'd helped him quit all those years ago, supporting him, making sure he got his patches, and berating him and geeing him on and just being there for him every time he tried to crack.

'*You just going to throw all that away? I thought you wanted to stop?' then she'd sighed and rubbed her hands together, looking at him with comforting anxiousness, 'Honey, has work really been getting to you that much? Really, I'm sorry, I've been so wrapped up lately with this migration tagging project that I haven't even asked.'*

And sympathy and understanding had only made it worse, because he'd lied and said yes. He'd told her work was getting him down when it was the complete opposite; work was keeping him *sane*, while his next door neighbour drove him *insane.*

He dragged it right down to the filter on the next few puffs, till he could almost hear the crackle and feel the heat in his lungs mirrored by the heat at his fingers. Will didn't own an ashtray, so Jeff shuffled inside to run the stub wet under the sink and throw it in the bin. He looked over at Eleanor, crawling about in her pen like crazy, picking up brightly coloured blocks and staring at them avidly before moving onto the next, shuffling like a deranged caterpillar. She'd gotten bigger in the past few months, and her hair was now an artless tumble down to her neck, now that her dad didn't keep it swept up in a band.

When he came back outside Will was screwing a hose into the standing pipe by the garage. The 'dog', or whatever it was, sat like Cousin It, its eyes obscured. Cautiously he reached out to stroke the mess of fur, only to receive a low, continuous threatening growl in return. The back off was instinctual, but laced with embarrassment. Jeff shrugged, looking at Will a little accusingly as he approached.

"I wouldn't, just yet," Will said.

"Let this thing near your house huh?" he said wryly, "Seems really friendly."

"She's just scared," Will said, scratching easily behind the dog's ear as the dirty, knotted mess stood up on what could be seen of her paws; then a long pink tongue emerged like a deflated balloon and began panting away, "she'll be fine, won't you Angel?"

"Angel? Really Will?"

"It was on her collar."

"Collar, fuck. You can't keep her if she's got owners."

“Already checked it out,” Will said, holding up a hand to test the water coming through, make sure it wasn’t too cold, “no one at that address owns a dog. They must have moved away. Left her behind. I don’t know. I don’t care. She’ll be alright here.”

When Jeff realised he had the cigarette packet in his hands again he sighed, purposefully closing it and stuffing the crumpled card into his back pocket. He sat down on the stairs and watched as Will meticulously and carefully washed the mangy mess. Occasionally Will would ask him to pass the dog shampoo, or get him a towel, or the pair of scissors from the utensil drawer. Other than that Will was quiet and calm as he revealed the tan coloured fur at her chest, or the white puffing curls on her paws, clipping away the matted slabs until, an hour and fifteen later, there it stood.

Bernese indeed, now ridiculously patchy, the loss of fur showing how deeply underweight she was, her eyes gooey and red and her teeth yellow and overgrown, but a Bernese nonetheless. Jeff shook his head and finished his second cigarette.

“Beautiful,” Jeff said facetiously, shaking his head.

“Isn’t she?” Will grinned “I’m going to make lunch, get Ellie some mashed carrot. She’s going crazy for it right now. Maybe try and make friends while I’m gone?” Will added, tipping his head to the dog currently shaking itself free of the wetness in her fur.

“Sure. Right. In a million years.”

They sat and stared at each other. Large, dopey, conjunctivitis ridden eyes stared at him. Jeff stared right back, even if he knew that probably wasn’t the best way to *make friends*. He listened as Will scrubbed his arms and changed his clothes, then picked up Elle with a ‘*what are you making, my little busy bee? Huh? You building that? Building it just so you can knock it down again, I know you’*. A laugh combined with a giggle and the sound of a raspberry blown against skin.

Jeff cautiously held his hand up towards the dog and waited. To the sound of frying bacon and toddler’s nonsense warbling and half formed words, Angel stood up and lumoxed forwards.

A sniff, careful, and then a cautious lick. Jeff smiled. He didn’t try for more.

That one sign of acceptance was enough.

It wasn’t that he held any particular stock in celebrating birthdays, honestly he would happily pass over his own as long as he could keep denying he was a year older every time Susan made him some insane, mess of a cake and bought some equally insane piece of lingerie that they always both ended up laughing over as she danced around the bedroom in it humming cabaret music. So it wasn’t that, it wasn’t some visceral need to shout to the world about fucking birthdays.

It had been because this time last year Will hadn't even told him it *was* his birthday, and there had been something in that. He found out a few months later, when Jeff's birthday rolled around, and Jeff had asked Will how old he was when Will had teased him.

'Ah,' he shrugged, 'older than you.'

'Oh yeah? How much older?'

A quick calculation, then, 'four years older, just the other month there. Old enough to know better. Still don't though.'

And there had been something sad in it. Not because Will had obviously wanted to avoid his birthday too, Jeff could've respected that, it was more that Jeff was sure Will had completely forgotten it even existed. At the time he'd been still trapped in that limbo state, *between being fished from the ocean and struggling to recover his lost child*. The thought that no one had even got to say to him, 'happy birthday, man', to make a stupid joke about his age or buy him a drink or, hell, Jeff didn't know.

Acknowledge that they were glad he was alive. That was what Jeff wanted for him. He wanted Will to know people were glad he was alive, and not some pale corpse somewhere with no family to mourn him and a child who would never even know his face.

So it had made sense, at first. Sneak round, because he wouldn't be expecting it. He wouldn't be expecting someone to say it and it would be a stupid, nice, hopefully welcome surprise. Susan was still asleep and Jeff had made pains not to wake her. He'd dressed quietly in the living room with the curtains drawn, then with a ridiculously childish sense of mischievousness, he'd gone down to the dunes and over to Will's back porch.

Angel knew him by now, sleeping on the sand as she was by the porch stairs, and barely raised a thumping wag as he passed. The key Will had given him months before slid in with barely a sound and Jeff edged inside, making sure not to open the door loud enough for the hinges to creak. Then he toed off his shoes at the heels and started across the living room rug.

The house was sleepily quiet but for the creaking floorboards beneath his feet. He felt like he was on some ancient galleon, far out to sea, with the windows showing nothing but glittering blue water as he crept, the sunshine casting the dust motes into suspended curtains. It was so quiet that he almost missed the ripped open envelope on the floor, or he would have if he hadn't stepped on it.

Jeff picked it up and put it on the coffee table, smiling when he saw the postmark: two days prior. He hoped it was from a birthday card. He liked to think Will had friends he never told him about.

Then he wondered, not for the first time, if he was about to get a laugh and a joke out of this, or a black eye. One thing he'd never tried with Will was a surprise. Susan liked it, she liked being scared. He would jump out and startle her and she would scream and dance around on her feet and slap him about the arms as he laughed. Then she would calm down and laugh too and kiss him with a – '*you are the* worst *Jeff Milo'*.

Still, he'd take his chances. The short hall was silent but for the occasional sound of ruffled material. He peeked into Eleanor's room, the door standing half open. She was fast asleep on her back, arms up by her head. Jeff smiled and wished he could sleep as soundly as toddlers did.

By the time he reached Will's door he was feeling content, excited and heartfelt.

Which changed and warped rapidly when he pushed the door open a fraction to peer inside and find something he did not expect.

"*Uh*."

The groan was swiftly cut off as Will, kneeling completely naked on his bed with his legs splayed, pushed a soft piece of cloth over his mouth with his left hand before sliding the fingers of the right up, in and out of sight between his legs.

Jesus mother fucking Christ.

It was instinctual to back away sharply, covering his own mouth in case he made a sound. Jeff blinked and breathed. *Leave, you moron, fucking leave right now. Leave. Leave.* Leave.

"Oh, uh...*uhhh.*"

And the sounds were soft, like little fingers against his skin, teasing him forwards. Jeff could feel his tongue going dry. *That happens*, he thought deliriously as he lined up his eyes with the crack in the door and tried to get some saliva into his mouth, *dumb clichés like that really happen?* His tongue was now thick and dumb in his mouth as he wet his lips and blinked, unable to look away from the rhythmic flexing of the tendon in Will's right arm, at the furious working of his knuckles.

Everything had become very still and very warm, almost itching. *It itched at him*. Will's skin was taught over his lithe form, his arms, face and chest far more tanned now than his still white thighs. His curls shook with every shiver, hanging down over his forehead. He undulated with each curve of his wrist, and every now and then a soft, aborted cry would escape his throat as his torso convulsed. The piece of cloth was still trapped in a death grip between white knuckles, pressed tightly up under the right of his jaw.

Jeff blinked as he noticed Will was clean shaven. *He hadn't been yesterday*. Which means he'd been up already this morning. There was no time to ponder, however, as Will brought the rumpled material to his mouth, taking the bundle between his teeth and biting down. And he saw that it wasn't a cloth, but something thinner, something that caught the low, glowing light from the closed white curtains, shimmering with a confused pattern on its glossy surface.

No time for it, no time for details other than those displaying themselves just for him. Jeff forced himself to watch the trail of Will's left hand as it slowly descended his chest, then his flat stomach, through the few dark hairs lining scruffily below his belly button, to wrap around his already hard cock, thick and pink and blushing at the head.

He had to close his eyes. He had to because he knew his own hand had been mirroring that movement, that sweet teasing movement that suddenly felt as if it were for his eyes watching, just for him, no one else. *Stop it, fucking stop it, god, oh god.* He opened his eyes and looked, watched, stared. Jeff purposefully placed his hands on both sides of the doorframe and curled his fingers around each side of the wood, flexing and un-flexing with every long smooth stroke Will gave himself. *With every touch, Jeff could feel his erection tightening in his jeans painfully.*

"Mmm. Mmm. *Mmm, fuck*," Will's muffled murmurs past the cloth between his teeth, his head drooping with every twist he gave the base, every time he pulled back to the top and thumbed the head, making it leak profusely, every time he was forced to adjust his legs and his fingers slipped before being forcedly pushed back inside, "fuck, fuck, ahhh."

Then it stopped, suddenly. Will's eyes were blinking rapidly but he had stopped, taking long deep breaths. It felt like whiplash. Jeff was almost ready to burst through the door and demand he keep going or beg to be allowed to finish him off himself. When Will pulled his right hand free with a wet, slick sound and let go of his engorged cock Jeff sucked both his lips into his mouth and bit on them.

Glistening hands reached up to take the material from his mouth, watching it carefully, almost mesmerised by it, before pushing his face against it and inhaling deeply. When Will exhaled, the sound was almost enough to tip Jeff over the edge; *soft, keening bordering on obscene*. Then he watched as Will turned and laid the object down on the bed, flattening it out with shaking fingers, and Jeff saw it for what it was.

A handkerchief. It was a handkerchief. A fancy, silk handkerchief by the looks of it. Maybe paisley patterned? Maybe. In maroons and browns and blues. He watched as Will slid into his lordosis reflex and rubbed his face against the small, colourful patch, nuzzling the fabric while his left hand once more found his cock and began to stroke, needy and wanton. Jeff knew he was breathing too hard when Will reached up awkwardly behind himself and, with his own slick fingers, slid two almost coyly past the pucker of his ass held high in the air, shivering as he did.

Jeff's right hand found itself clamped over his mouth and nose as his heart hammered in his chest, pounding in his ears, desperate to be allowed to voice his want, his need, his lust, his appreciation of the most fucking erotic thing he'd ever seen in his fucking life. *Yeah, oh god yeah like that gorgeous, touch yourself like that.* He didn't manage to stop his left hand creeping down, juddering near his belt, until it slipped further and cupped his raging hard on through the tight denim. Jeff made an aborted sound, let out as a slow puff of breath as he watched Will's twin fingers slip deeper, past the first knuckle.

"Please," Will was begging quietly, mouth smothered to the silky material as his body shook from exertion and pleasure, his back a panoply of red heat and pale, smooth lines, "*please*."

So fucking beautiful, you're gonna make me cum, that what you want? Jeff thought wildly as his hand rubbed furiously at the rough denim and Will squirmed on the bed, his shoulder arching as he tried to take himself deeper, *You want to make me cum?* he thought deliriously, *You beautiful fucking minx*. Jeff could feel the wetness against his face as he panted into his hand, shivering as Will began bucking his hips.

Then suddenly Will twisted and his shoulder shuddered and Jeff could only think *yes, fucking yes, Jesus Christ fucking yes*, as Will's fingers slipped out and he collapsed down onto the bed shuddering as he came with one curling, mewled, plaintive word.

"*Hannibal*."

A bucket of ice water would have been far less cruel, and less jarring. Jeff blinked, staring, hands turned still as stone. The condensation on his cheeks and fingers suddenly felt slimy and unpleasant, the intense racing of his heart more sickening than anything else, the explosive heat in his groin utterly dispelled.

Suddenly Jeff felt less as if he'd been lured to a hidden jewel of erotica just for him in the Miami morning sand, and more like Hannibal Lecter had just fucked Will Graham over a thousand mile distance, and he'd been forced to watch. Forced to watch as Will gathered the material to him, his face blissfully sad, and drank in the smell of it, rubbed it along his neck and over his face, eyes lost and far off and completely bereft.

You sick fucking bastard, Jeff suddenly chastised himself as he crept backwards, blushing furiously, hands shaking, *what the fuck is wrong with you, huh? Think this was a free show? You're wrong in the head, know that? Wrong in the head.*

It wasn't difficult to get back to the door without making too much noise. He opened it and stood there for a moment in the cool morning air, calming himself even as the embarrassment and anger still bit at him equally. The anger, the shame, the *anger*. Then...

"Will? Hello? Anyone up?" he called as he pulled the door too loudly, "Hello?"

There was a pause, the sound of rummaging and feet on floorboards, "Uh, yeah," came Will's voice from beyond the door, "just up. Gimme a second, I'm not decent."

Oh I know that, Jeff thought, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath, then another. When Will finally appeared he was in his ratty dressing gown, looking slightly flushed still across the cheeks as he fussed with some things on the coffee table and the mantelpiece.

"I'm going to take a shower. Only be a few minutes. There's coffee still in the machine, if you want it. Might need heating up."

Then he was gone, and Jeff stood perfectly still, staring at the doorway and listening to the sound of shushing water and the hum of the electric shower.

Hannibal.

He put both his hands over his face and sighed, sitting down roughly. *Stupid fucking asshole, Jeff Milo, you're a stupid fucking piece of shit. It's just sex, right, it's just fucking and feeling good and you know that so what the hell are you getting so worked up about?* The hands fell away, leaving him cold. He felt cold. Cold and a little empty. He looked at the coffee table as he clasped his hands, elbows on his knees.

He frowned.

Then he looked to the mantelpiece. Nothing. A quick jaunt to the kitchen. Nothing on the fridge, nothing on the cork board by the front door. Jeff came back to the living room and sat down, disappointed to find no trace of a card. When he picked up the torn open envelope, he noted a franking machine stamp with a long string of numbers ending in the name *Matthew Brown*, and a Maryland code. Will's name and address wasn't right, written in tight, blocky black ink on the front. It was a p.o.box in Baltimore which Jeff could only assume forwarded everything on to Miami. On the back, a return address for *The Baltimore State Asylum for the Criminally insane*, with a check mark in the top corner which had been signed and co-signed in two different inks.

Jeff's blood went cold. His anger stayed hot.

"Hey," Will walked into the room dressed in stonewashed jeans and a blue and brown check shirt, hair tousled and wet, looking distractedly down at his phone in his hand as he spoke; Jeff stared at him, Will's clean shaven face looking far too young to be turning thirty eight, "sorry, must've slept in."

Quiet was all he could be, because it was suddenly difficult to think straight and the thought of talking only led to the idea of shouting and demanding to know and wanting and fucking *needing*...

When Will returned to the living room with a cup of coffee for him a few minutes later, Jeff took it and put it straight down, managing to squeeze out,

"Get a birthday note from your pen pal?" as he held up the envelope, "What'd it say?"

It wasn't immediate, but it was there. A hesitation, and then...Will looked to the torn envelope in Jeff's hands, then to Jeff, then back to it, *and Jeff knew*.

"Nothing," Will said, qualifying after a moment's silence, "it wasn't a letter."

"Oh? A birthday gift?" he was amazed at the calm neutrality he managed.

"Don't know," Will said absently as he turned on the television, "I burned it soon as I opened it."

The lie was vicious against his ears. Almost as if it burned against his skin, with hot flames of charcoaled words left unsaid in the sand, or hands and lips stretching across the country to tangle themselves around them both in this absurd situation. As if he thought that looking to his right, to the doorway, would reveal the man whose shadow appeared to be plaguing them both.

"You still wanting to do dinner later?" Will asked, eyes firmly on the television as he read the scrolling headlines on the twenty four hour news, "I can always cancel the babysitter, you know, it's not a problem."

A knee jerk reaction to say *no*, but there was no chance of that. Not now. Jeff had already spent the last couple of weeks talking Susan into it even though she'd been so busy, and there

was no way she'd wake up this morning with a fridge full of half marinated ribs and soaking mung beans for salad and almost finished dessert, just to cancel Will's dinner. *Fuck*.

"No, it's fine, we're on," Jeff said, standing; Will looked to him, eyes seeming slightly distant but interested, "I better go, actually. Got a lot to do today. Just wanted to say...happy birthday."

The soft smile that answered him, sliding all the way up into creased grey eyes, should have made his day. Instead it made him want to break something.

"Thanks, Jeff. I'll see you when the babysitter shows up."

And Jeff left, before his raging insides became raging outside.

It hadn't helped. Eight hours, he'd thought, eight hours is plenty of time to calm down and get some perspective. Realise that what he'd done was pretty appalling and he had *no* right to be even mildly angry and that he needed to just let this go, move on and not make their complicated affair any more complicated than it already was.

Instead those eight hours, watching Susan sing to herself as she chopped salad and piped whipped cream onto the key lime pie and watching Saturday cartoons with Anthony and trying desperately to login to the server at the Institute to get some work done, had only allowed him to stew in his own bitter juices.

He'd gone through a whole pack of smokes, newly opened at twelve o'clock, enough to make his throat feel hoarse with it, but his nerves feel deadened and sensitive simultaneously.

By the time the knock came at the door, Jeff had two glasses of the red wine already in him, and a tight jaw to grind his teeth with.

"Oh, thank you," he heard Susan saying as she answered the door, "you didn't have to bring anything. Come in."

It was worse, somehow, that Susan had begun to lose her instinctual dislike of Will Graham. It had been easier before, when Susan was surly and judgmental and Jeff could feel like the one with the moral high ground. Of course as soon as Eleanor had been returned to her father's loving arms, Susan hadn't been able to hold onto her prejudices for long. Will was wonderful with his daughter, and Susan hadn't been able to help but begrudgingly accept that she'd been wrong, then start hassling Jeff that if he was going to go over and visit all the time why didn't he just invite Will and Eleanor round, and then making him dinner and...

Fuck. Jeff took a long swallow of wine and wished his wife still hated the man he couldn't stop thinking about.

"Not sure if it'll go with anything," Will was saying as he was ushered inside, "I was never told what you were going to serve."

“Oh, my fault, blame me,” he could hear the grin, “I made Jeff promise to keep it a surprise.”

Then the sound shifted closer, and Jeff looked up from pouring himself another glass to find his wife, her shoulder length blonde hair straightened and her lips glossy with cherry balm, in her loose, black beach dress, next to Will in a deep maroon, well fitting shirt and expensive looking black slacks, his hair brushed to soft curls and waves above his shaven face, eyes not seeming to know what to do with themselves.

Which is how Jeff felt, faced with the two people he cared about most in the world besides his son and his parents, standing there looking like effigies to beauty as if to raise his guilt up from the earth where he’d hastily tried to bury it, and squeeze it till the blood ran out onto the pristine floor.

“Jeff?”

“Hmm?” he looked up, catching Susan’s eye, realising he’d been spacing out.

“You’ve nearly drunk the whole bottle,” she said, giving him an odd look; she put down the bottle of white Will had brought onto the counter and took what Will was holding, *a charcoal grey suit jacket with black silk lining*, “I’ll find the bottle opener.”

When she left, Will put his hands in his pockets and looked around the living room. It was bright but softly so, with the up-lighter standing lamps on in each corner. They cast Will in a very flattering light. Jeff realised he was staring and looked away just as Will looked to him.

He opened his mouth to say something, Jeff could see him do it, but just then Susan came back and Will closed his mouth.

“Well, you two sure have a lot to talk about,” she said playfully, shaking her head, “dinner’s ready though. Why don’t you go sit down and I’ll just finish up?”

Will nodded with a soft ‘*thanks*’ and Jeff picked up his glass. Then, on a second thought, picked up the white too and the bottle opener. He thought he might need it before the end of the night.

“Oh my god,” Susan said, lifting her hand, “I nearly forgot. You might not believe me but I used your monograph last week.”

Dinner had been great. It tasted divine, *spare ribs in homemade barbecue sauce with mung bean salad, poached salmon in white wine and sherry and seasoned with dill, potato salad, steamed potatoes with rosemary and mixed vegetables, then of course key lime pie for desert.* And it had all passed Jeff by in a haze of dislike, disinterest and dissonance as he slowly drank himself into a silent ball of misanthropy. He sat and listened as his wife and Will talked, and Will forced himself to socialize even though Jeff could see the tension in him and the need to flee and the uncomfortable feeling in the way he sat slightly hunched over his wine.

Still, he was making more of an effort than Jeff was. Jeff couldn't bring himself to appreciate that fact. He was too far gone by then.

A few times Susan had commented on his silence. When Will had gone to the bathroom she had seemed genuinely concerned, until he'd snapped something inflammatory about how well she and Will were getting on and she'd raised her hands and made a strict face.

'*Not tonight Jeff. Don't you dare do this tonight.*'

And so he'd shut his mouth, *I'll just shut my mouth then will I?* He thought. Shut his mouth and put up with the stupid fucking situation he'd ended up forced into. Watching them smile and laugh and talk as everything was *fine* and *dandy* and why couldn't they all just *get along*, he thought acidly. He knew why they couldn't all just get along. He knew well fine.

"My..." Will paused, swallowing, eyes narrowed, "which one?"

Susan used her lifted hand to count off the words as she said them, as if learned by rote, "The FBI standard for determining time of death by insect activity."

"Ok," Will said, smiling mechanically, "I hope you haven't changed profession in the past few days and just not told us."

Jeff tightened his hand around his glass and felt a visceral need to tell Will to *go fuck himself*, being so fucking friendly when he knew what they were doing and he *knew* what it meant!

"No, no," she laughed, "actually it was to do with whales. I'm always to do with whales, right now, yeah hun?" Jeff smiled at her and took a drink, even as the smile didn't reach his eyes. *Hypocrite, fucking hypocrites.*

"I'm working on a huge project right now, Major Mammal Migratory Pathways, MMMP. It's a global thing, working with Grant Harris in Africa. He's US Fish and Wildlife but been transferred and, god, it's fascinating. I mean I'm married to the sea, sorry darling," she said with a conciliatory smile and stroke of Jeff's hand, "but Africa looks stunning. Its fruit bats there, would you think it? Fruit bats, the biggest migration in all of Africa."

"Really," Will said, sounding genuinely interested.

Just shut up, Jeff thought, *both of you just shut the fuck up*.

"Yeah, I know. And, god, what was I going to say though?" Susan looked down and snapped her fingers, "umm, Grant Harris, MMMP...oh right! The monograph. Yes, there was a Right whale found on a beach near Orlando last week?"

"I saw it on the news," Will nodded.

"She was big too wasn't she? Turns out she was pregnant. It was awful, beached herself we thought. But it's odd, really odd because it was the wrong time of year for them to be off that coastline and in those stretches of water and no matter how hard we tried we couldn't even figure out how she could have gotten so lost. Everyone was getting their panties in a twist, trying to come up with different theories, and I proposed that she had been dead *before* she

even got to the beach. No outward signs of trauma, no other ideas and hell, they let me do it so I went looking for something that would help and who's name would pop up?

Remembering meeting Susan on the balcony. I don't smoke*, she'd said. And knowing he could make her happy in the way she made him happy.*

"Ended up making a lot of adjustments for average sea temperature over length of time, plus the suggested length of time beached and the air temp and humidity, and the size of the animal and then the projected route she might have come and bingo! It matched up when we called down to our research station at Crooked Island and they had catalogued fifteen pods in the past few weeks all heading past them out to sea. We think she was part of one of them, died from natural causes maybe due to birth, and was swept down through the Gulf Stream which is giving quite a pull at the moment. So," Susan slowed down, seeming to realise how quickly she'd been talking, "yeah. You solved the mystery for us, Mr. Graham."

When she lifted her glass Will did so on instinct, toasting his wife. The sight made Jeff feel ill. *That night, feeling so caught up in Will's beautiful forgiveness of his past and acceptance of his future, kissing him softly and letting it turn to more because until then he'd never allowed himself to accept how attracted he was to that deep seated strength.*

"Well, I'll take the credit," Will said, "but if you're ever needing it again, Mant and Nuorteva in Tedeschi are better on insects. The FBI just use mine as the standard because it's more accessible."

"Ah, so you're an artist then," she said through a wry smile.

"Sorry?"

"Artists are the modest ones who always think everyone's better than they are. Scientists are the obnoxious ones who'll fight to be top dog even if they know they're wrong. I should know," she said, leaning forwards to snag an olive, "I am one."

Will laughed genuinely, scratching at his jaw. Jeff took a large drink and swallowed noisily.

"Maybe I'm a bit of both then. Wouldn't be the first time I'd been accused of being obnoxious, normally followed by rude, know-it-all and get out."

"Oh, surely not."

"You've never been at a crime scene with me," Will shrugged and took a sip of white.

By the time they were both done, his own inner voice had become mixed with theirs, turning to a mass headache. Jeff rubbed at his eyes as the conversation lulled. When he got up he was amazed that he wasn't unsteady, fishing for his cigarettes in the pocket of his jacket hung up on the far wall.

"Sorry honey," he said, "I know you're gonna hate me, but I'm gonna nip out to the porch."

"Really?" Susan watched him critically before sighing when he nodded, "can you believe him?" she asked Will, garnering a returned smile, "ok. Just take it easy, you've been going at

it like a kid behind the bike sheds. Going to give yourself lung cancer in a week," she said as she started clearing dishes.

Will stood up automatically to help. Jeff left before he let his lips say what they really wanted to.

He was half way through his second smoke when the sliding door opened and then closed again. No one spoke, so he knew it was Will. The soft sound of shoes on wood, and then Will was sitting down beside him on the stairs, hands clasped, elbows on his knees.

The sounds of fishing boats clanging the last shift, out to catch the night shrimp. The sound of peewits down at the shoreline picking up the worms that came up to eat the leftover vegetation. The just discernible scent of Will's cologne that he never wore, something heady and sonorous. The sight of Will's little bungalow just down the beach, the windows glowing and the shape of the babysitter moving about in the kitchen.

Lives, all intertwined and knotted, messy and strangling. Jeff closed his eyes when Will started to speak, taking another long drag.

"Seems a little redundant now, but you look terrible and I only saw you this morning. Are you alright?"

He stayed quiet, because the answer he wanted to give was too much. The smoke curled out of his mouth and nose, twirling up into the deep blue of the night sky.

"Ok," Will nodded, seeming to accept the silence, "well, can I say I'm glad you kept dinner on even if you're not feeling great. I wasn't going to exactly celebrate on my own," Will smiled softly, making Jeff's eyes narrow in the memory of *hands and shivering flesh and gasping mouth and needy jerks and dear god wanting just to...* "and truth be told, it still feels a little odd not to have anything on my social calendar for the year..."

"Jesus just *shut the fuck up*."

Silence. He would have been aghast that the words had slipped out, had he been sober. Being drunk, on the other hand, allowed him to turn his head to Will lazily and look at the uncertain disbelief there. Will blinked and looked away when Jeff just kept staring.

"Ok," a pause, then, "I'm going back inside."

"No," Jeff said, reaching up to pull him back down; Will jerked away with a gasp and a shiver, reaching up to rub at his arm as if burned and...

...Jeff snapped. He couldn't help it. He couldn't stand it. The thought that his touch was so repulsive, while the mere scent of another so vile and horrifying as the Chesapeake Ripper was something Will still craved like a drug.

"You fucking lil' hypocrite," Jeff breathed out, slurring around his l's; Will was blinking rapidly, looking out towards the ocean as he rubbed mechanically at his arm, "what th'hell do you think this is, huh? A fucking game? This is my *life*. *My* life, and my wife, and my kid,

and you're in there fucking thinking about *him* while you fuck me and fuck my whole family, is that it? Huh?" Jeff didn't realise he'd been leaning closer until he was breathing hot and wet against Will's ear; the man still as a statue, "Well you can just fuck off, an' keep your fucking lies and secrets and whatever the fuck else is in that fucked up head of yours."

He wasn't pushed back, it was just that Will stood suddenly and it unbalanced him. Jeff reached forwards and caught his weight on the railing, slopping his wine onto the steps. When he looked up, all righteous anger and confused anger and regretful anger, Will was walking away across the sand, right hand still clasped to his left arm where Jeff had grabbed him. He disappeared from view as he left the pool of light given out by their house, and Jeff watched him go without a word until he was gone.

Nothing but footsteps in the sand.

He wasn't sure how much longer it was before Susan came to the door to find him still sitting there.

"I swear you're gonna smell like a chimney when you..." she said in a sing song voice that drifted off as she stepped out, "oh, I thought Will was out here with you."

"He was," Jeff shrugged, snorting, *not my fault if the touchy fucking asshole can't face the fucking truth*, "he went home."

"He what?" she said, with a hint of disbelieving laughter, "but...he said he was going to tell me about fishing numbers in Maryland. We haven't even opened his bottle of white yet."

"What did I just say?" Jeff said, standing, leaving his half spilt glass on the porch, "He went home. I don't know why. Why the hell would I know why he ever does anything?"

"Ok," she said as he moved past her, "well, I mean...did you guys have a fight or something?"

"No," he lied tightly.

"Jeff, I can tell when you're lying, and especially lying when you're drunk."

"Come on, Susan, let's just leave it, ok?"

"No, not ok. We were having a nice time and now something's happened and I just want to know..."

"It's not *important*," he said, a little unbalanced, smiling, "ok?" he walked forwards and took her by the shoulder, leaning in to kiss at her neck messily.

"What you think that's how this goes, huh? Good luck with that after you sat there, *all* night, like a belligerent little kid and ignored us. He's your friend Jeff, not mine, and..."

"Oh that's rich. That's really rich," he butted in, gesturing widely with his right hand, "after you and him were all cosy cosy and bonding over dead fucking fish and all I get is told to shut my mouth and stop *fucking* smoking!"

“What the hell is the *matter* with you?” she asked loudly, incredulously, “All we did is have dinner, Christ, you think I was asking you to walk on hot coals.”

“Yeah, sure, just blow it all out of proportion,” Jeff scoffed, “Will left, so what, he’s a bit fucking weird, probably couldn’t handle being social or whatever. Just leave him alone and he’ll leave you alone, alright?”

“God, I can’t deal with this right now,” Susan, looking down at the floor, rubbed at the back of her neck and shook her head, lips pursed, “all week, all week you’ve been after me to do this and I’ve been so busy at work and with Anthony’s play group and making dinner every night and everything else, Jeff, and this is the fucking thanks I get. So I’m going to bed and, seriously, if you even think about coming upstairs it better be to fucking apologise.”

He never made it upstairs.

He raged about downstairs for a while, spitting out insults at Will and Susan both under his breath, trying to put the dishes away in the dishwasher and getting it all stuck and mangled, giving up with a fresh set of curses and a kick to the machine which rattled like a dining set dropped from a height, enough to have Susan shouting down,

“Jeff I swear to god if you wake Anthony I will come down and throw you out myself. Calm down!”

And the sound and the pain of it and the knowing he was wrong under all the bravado and the anger and the lashing out was enough to have him say, “Fine!” as he sallied to the door and opened it, “I’m going!”

And he was out on the sand in the cool night air and spitting every time he tasted something bitter on his tongue and meandering as the ground moved, *shifted* about him, and trying not to think about Susan *smiling and laughing as he kissed her stomach and asked, “why don’t we adopt a kid? We’re gonna adopt”* and Will’s beautiful smile as he looked down at his daughter, the same foolishly carefree affection as when he was *drunk and naked under Jeff’s hands, laughing and gentle and fragile.*

And when he looked up he found a growling dog before him in the moonlight. Angel, hackles raised, teeth showing. And he looked up to see his wandering feet had brought him to the top of the dune and begun to head down towards Will’s bungalow without even thinking, and now his mangy stray was doing the thing Jeff was supposed to do, *protect him*, and Jeff tried to hold onto the anger as he looked up and, just visible through the slanted kitchen window, caught sight of Will throwing up in the sink, knuckles white around the counter, other to his stomach, face pale and eyes closed.

And Jeff pulled himself back over and sat down, out of sight, hearing Angel snap a quick bark and then quieten down as Jeff stared up at the moon and wished he could be better.

Wished he could be a better man than the stray he resented for what little love it was able to give.

Mea Culpa

Chapter Summary

> “Holy shit,” Ally blinked, her artful, pinned up black hair falling into her small, tight face, “and here I thought you were one of those safe, reliable betas. You know, the ones they put in the romantic comedies no one cares about.”
>
> “You mean you thought I was a boring fuck,” Jeff corrected.
>
> “Well, yeah. Now though? Maybe just a stupid fuck.”

Over a month. Sometimes he wasn’t sure, or didn’t like to believe it, and he would check the calendar in the office, tapping it with his pen. The date would mock him, with the little dancing carp in the bottom right hand corner waving its hat and saying some stupid fish joke.

There are two fish in a tank. One turns to the other and says, “Hey, do you know how to drive this thing?”

Normally that would have made him chuckle, stupid and harmless as it was. Now, he just reached over and picked up the calendar and wrote:

To Do: **STOP BEING A STUPID FUCKING PRICK**

Then put it back down. *Over a month and he still hadn’t spoken to him.* Then put his head in his hand. *Over a month of having doors slammed in his face and phone calls completely ignored.* Then slide it down to the desk, face down with a thump and a groan. *Over a month of Will Graham telling Jeff Milo to fuck right off without even having to say a word.*

“That bad huh?” a voice from above asked.

“Mm hmm,” he said, sitting up and looking at Ally Whitehall, standing by his desk in her white shirt and snazzy blue waistcoat, “bad enough to do something worse.”

She smiled a little thinly, though he knew her better. And she knew him better too. His colleague in Fisheries for the last three years. A smart omega with the driest wit he'd ever come across, someone who never let anyone take her for a ride. Especially Jeff.

“Cig break?” she suggested, throwing a thick stack of paperwork on the corner of his already cluttered desk.

Jeff took one look at the stack and nodded, “cig break.”

They stood out in the slight chill of the shade. The wind had turned cold out of nowhere over the last week, coming from the north east out over the Atlantic instead of from the Gulf of Mexico to the west. It was cloudy and overcast; not a typical day for the time of year. He wished it could at least have the decency to be sunny. Jeff didn't appreciate when the weather mirrored his mood; it was too cliché.

Jeff finished his first while Ally was still fussing two thirds through hers.

He lit up another.

"Must be costing you a fortune," she nodded at the pack in his hand, "was it a shock?"

"Heck yes it was," he mumbled round the cig in his mouth, "last time I bought a pack of twenty lites I was three bucks down. Now I'm looking for change in a five and being told by the cashier to hand over the rest of the fucking money."

"Been swearing a lot too," she noted; Ally always worked laterally. Normally Jeff liked her conversational contortionism. Not so much today.

"Yup."

"Hanlan came back from New Mexico the other day. Did you see his catch?"

"That man could find talking barracudas in the arctic and I wouldn't be impressed," Jeff groused.

"Well at least he *found* what he was looking for, and didn't end up wasting thousands in project money for a wasted expedition."

"Ally, please," Jeff dragged his left hand over his face, voice strained, "could you not rub it in right now?"

"If you tell me why you won't stop swearing and smoking, sure."

Another long drag. When he looked down from the sky he realised they were alone. A few cars passed at the end of the street. The urge was sudden, almost claustrophobic, crushing at his chest like a too tight hug. Coming close to a year and a half now, close to a year and a half since he'd hurled his easy life into the ocean and come out dripping with complications.

Or one main complication anyway.

Fuck it, he thought a little hysterically.

"Because I've been cheating on my wife with another guy."

Surprised eyes and a welcome cough, as he'd caught Ally on the inhale. She pushed away from the wall and stared at him while Jeff just sagged a little and stayed put, her face wryly impassive as always.

"You're joking."

Jeff leaned his head back against the brick of the wall, shaking it back and forth as he haemorrhaged smoke. He felt a little giddy as he swallowed. *Feel like confessing?* He bit at his lip and worried the flesh. *Only this isn't who you should be confessing to.*

He knew that, but even the release of just telling *someone* was sweet and heady in its recklessness. He savoured what little he could get.

"Holy shit," Ally blinked, her artful, pinned up black hair falling into her small, tight face, "and here I thought you were one of those safe, reliable betas. You know, the ones they put in the romantic comedies no one cares about."

"You mean you thought I was a boring fuck," Jeff corrected.

"Well, yeah. Now though? Maybe just a stupid fuck."

"You wouldn't be wrong."

"So, is he worth it?" she asked, grinding out her still smoking cigarette butt against the wall.

"That really all you've got to ask?"

"What, you want me to come out with a tirade? People cheat on their partners all the time. I wouldn't have enough breath in one lifetime to mother all of you."

Jeff scratched the back of his neck and looked up at the blank, featureless wall of the building opposite over the short corrugated fence that separated them. Some big pan-financial that had bespoke-suited, flash looking employees buzzing in and out of its glass doors all day. Unlike theirs, where the shlubby scientists drove up in reliable, safe, low-cost cars and ate salads because it was cheap rather than for the health benefit. *They looked like the sort of people who had high end affairs with glamorous, rare male omegas*, Jeff thought, *not people like me*.

Not people like me. The leaves on the trees, just visible over the fence, ruffled in the breeze. *Fuck*, he thought, and ploughed on before he changed his mind.

"Hey Ally, you've been with betas, right? What was it like? I mean, before you met Michael."

"Yeah," she said, tipping her head a little inquisitively; then her sharp eyes lit up, "wait a minute. Fuck me, is he omega? Your bit on the side?"

"Please don't call him that," Jeff said sourly.

"Well, some people get all the luck. How'd you land yourself a rare orchid like that?"

"Not much of a story," he lied with a shrug. He knew Ally could tell, by the way she snorted and crossed her arms but didn't comment. Jeff pressed on before he lost his nerve, "Look, you're bonded now, stuck with Michael."

"Are you bad mouthing my Michael?" ally raised a sharp brow.

“Of course I’m not, I fucking love Michael. Guy’s nice as pie. You’d never even know he was alpha the way you’ve got him trained.”

“True,” Ally smiled secretively.

“Look,” Jeff exhaled and chucked his cig butt on the ground carelessly, “I just wondered, is there a big difference? I mean a really big, insurmountable fucking difference?”

“Between betas and alphas?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“Well, it depends. Do you think there’s a big difference between the number six and the number twelve?”

“What the fuck is that supposed to..?”

Jeff would have continued if Ally hadn’t held up her hands, palms opposite to indicate the first number in inches, and then she pulled them wide apart to indicate the second. He gave her a sour look.

“I’m not talking about fucking genitalia sizes, Ally.”

“Don’t feel insecure about the bedroom department,” Ally said, deadpan, “it’s just a vagary of biology. Anyway, what you asking me for? Trying to wile him away from an alpha? You’ll have your work cut out. Damn, I remember the first time I met Michael. Thought I was going to tear him out of his clothes just from bumping too close to him in the cereal aisle. Like I said,” she said as she made to go back inside, shivering as the wind picked up, “it’s just biology.”

She left him standing out in the cold, hands in his pockets. *It’s just biology* was all fine, he thought, but as far as he was concerned it was just as useless in the long run as his own excuse of *it’s just sex.*

If there was one thing he’d learned from his professors and doctors at university, it was that biology wasn’t a stationary thing. It moved and evolved and invented.

Biology always found a way.

Knocking made it simple and anonymous, and had become his chosen method of choice. Will didn’t have a doorbell, so everyone had to knock. He’d taken the front door too, because there was no window and Will never bothered to check the peep hole.

Footsteps coming towards the door. Then the sound of the lock. Then the door opened and Will stood there, wearing his glasses, an old grey t-shirt and a pair of black shorts to his mid-thigh, barefoot. Jeff barely had the chance to open his mouth before Will let out an unimpressed, incredulous sound and slammed the door shut in his face.

That made seventeen slammed doors now, over five weeks. Jeff had been hoping that perseverance would win him some points. It seemed not.

The back door wasn't open when he circled round the rear porch, but he'd been expecting that.

He'd tried it a few weeks ago, angry and a little miserable because things had fallen through at work and his HoD was pissed, and Susan was still being sharp with him but at least he'd had the *chance* to apologise to her profusely and sincerely, and *hell* he had been missing Will something fierce, really burning away the frayed rope of his control...and when he'd been refused entrance at the front door he'd tried his key in the back door and found the locks changed.

Sweared out a blue streak on Will's back porch before going to sit down by the water. It was at least satisfying to know that his pitching arm was still decent, as he'd thrown the shimmering key far enough out into the water that he didn't even hear it splash.

Now, he was at least calmer. Felt a little more like he could be reasonable. He knocked on the French doors, watching as Will walked into the living room and then round to the bedrooms, utterly ignoring him.

So he decided to go for it, because it was better than nothing and he was sick fed up of not being able to say what he wanted to say. He pulled a jotter of thick A4 paper and a marker from his satchel bag. When Will reappeared he was carrying Eleanor in his arms, the little tot dressed in a bright red t-shirt with a big yellow pineapple emblazoned upon it and blue shorts. Jeff scribbled quickly before holding the paper up against the window.

I'm sorry

Will seemed to glance at it only as a reaction to the movement. Eleanor waved at Jeff with one hand, the other shoved to her mouth as she chewed her fingers. Jeff waved back, but it dissolved as Will continued to ignore him. He watched him put Elle in her high chair and rummage around for her bib in one of the many kitchen drawers.

Jeff dropped the sheet in his hand and tore out another from the jotter. When he lifted it to the glass and pressed it flat he could see himself in the mirror on the opposite wall, looking like a pathetic fool. Truthfully, he didn't care. He'd look like a pathetic fool if that's what it took.

Really really sorry

Will glanced up once as he re-entered, lips thinning as he looked back to Elle and fitted the bib round her neck. That sheet was dropped for another.

Let me tell you
how sorry

Will rubbed at his neck harshly, agitatedly, but didn't look up. Jeff watched him open the baby food with tight fingers, looking fraught and angry all at once. Eleanor was waving her

hands and laughing in her chair, obviously thinking this was all part of some great big joke. Or a pantomime, one of the two.

Jeff pulled out another sheet.

Please

And he wasn't sure, as his movements were sharp and deliberate, if Will suddenly dropping the baby food to the table and turning away from him was a step in reverse or a step forwards. Will stood, back to Jeff, one arm around his middle and the other on his left hip. Jeff could see his face in the mirror; undecided.

He wrote quickly but precisely before flattening the paper to the window once more.

yrros gnikcuf yllear m'I

And, in the mirror, he saw Will look up and smile with a quick laugh. It was short and aborted and Will lifted his right hand to cover it, try and rub it away. But it had been there, and just the sight of it made Jeff's world make sense again. It was almost absurd how much, but it did.

Discarded pages were fluttering at his feet, all jumbles and variations on the same message; *forgive me*. Jeff pulled down the one in his hand and let it fall with the others. Will didn't move, even as Eleanor began bashing at her little plastic table with the unguarded spoon her father had left there.

Please let me in, Jeff thought blankly.

Will stayed stock still.

I'm fucking begging you.

The faintest of movement as Will swallowed, running his hand through his hair, and looked up. Eyes meeting. Holding. Jeff thought he could feel his heart in his throat as Will turned suddenly, crossing the room in three quick strides and stood there, *just on the other side of the glass*.

Close enough to imagine...

The venetian blind unfurling down from the ceiling with a messy, zipping *thwap* made Jeff snap back in surprise. The glass, before a doorway, now became a wall. It reflected him, standing in his sandals with his work bag, sheets of discarded paper chasing round his feet like excited puppies.

A sudden bitter taste on his tongue and the memory of words fumbling from his mouth, *just fuck off, an' keep whatever the fuck else is in that fucked up head of yours*. He knew it wasn't right, that the words he half remembered had probably been worse, the memory smeared with drink and an anger so tight and hideous that it had, for that moment, turned him into the thing he hated the most.

His father. His real father. Memories of drink stained breath and being scared every time those fumbling footsteps came towards his room as he pretended to sleep because he knew what came next and the bruises were as difficult to hide as his mother's were. Just as difficult to bear.

Things he didn't want to think about. Things he *hadn't* thought about in a long time. Of pain being an everyday thing, fear being a part of his life like excitement and happiness and tiredness. Just another thing, another part of existence, nothing special. And it had been so long since then, since that had all been ripped away like a festering band-aid and his life had opened up like the sun coming out to scare the dark away and Jeff hadn't even known things could be so damn good all the time, since his dad had finally used his fists on the wrong person and ended up behind bars and his mom had remarried when Jeff was thirteen. *Anthony Milo, a beta from Washington with kind brown eyes and a love for country music that had brought him and his mother together, enough that Jeff could almost forgive country music itself for being so damn awful. He could remember his mom and Anthony dancing in the garish halls she dragged him to, decked up in sparkling tassels and hats, laughing and smiling and holding each other close amid the myriad of swirling people like an exotic aquarium. He still couldn't stand country music, but he'd always love it for what it had brought him. A family.*

And now.

And then there was now.

Words spoken in a drunken anger so tight he hadn't even felt guilt in that white hot moment, not a shred of it, as he'd reached up and grabbed Will's arm hard enough to bruise and yanked him back to the steps. Had only wanted to keep him there, make him stay, make him understand, and afterwards, the thought of making him understand had made his right hand curl instinctively into a fist as he'd leaned in and poured hot, hateful words into Will's ear, and just the thought that he could take that hate and channel it through that those furious, curled fingers didn't seem so damn unreasonable now if Will wouldn't listen, wouldn't understand him...

And he hadn't even dared to think of it until now because he'd been avoiding the thought like prey avoids the stalking predator; the cover of lies avoids the searing truth. And now Jeff felt sick as he turned suddenly and hurried off towards home, ignoring the papers flapping in the breeze, ignoring the stumbling of his feet in the sand and the still clutched marker pen in his hand. Because all he could feel was the roiling in his gut and the inescapable truth that he may have Anthony Milo's name but he sure as hell didn't have his DNA clutching at his genes, twisting them to be what they wanted, to what his *biology* needed.

He sure as hell had his alpha father's blood in his veins still, enough to run red hot and furious when the feeling took him, to turn to the bottle when he was sad or stressed or ridden ragged by guilt, enough to want something so badly that nothing seemed too far too keep what was his. Not even spilling blood.

The Sicilian orange blossom honey he'd bought at the market on his lunch break, *Susan's favourite,* was left by shaking hands on the breakfast bar in the kitchen, its small white tag held on by elastic band around the lid still showing the black biro *I love you* he'd managed to

cram onto it earlier. He sat down on the couch tightly, controlled, and put his face in his hands.

When Susan arrived home half an hour later, it was to see Jeff before she found her gift, still sitting on the living room sofa, staring at the far wall, hand to his mouth as he rubbed at his lips.

“Jeff, did you get milk on the way home? I really need to make that jello tonight for playgroup tomorrow or the moms will give me hell again if I bring something different,” she called through as she passed by the door, "you know what that Celia Darnage is like. Stroppy cow."

He didn’t respond. Couldn’t. *Didn’t want to have to*. The sound of bags being put down in the kitchen. Something that sounded like a sigh mixed with a laugh. Then footsteps, closer, closer, and Jeff felt sick and trapped and hated it more than anything.

“Did you sneak out to the market at...” Susan’s voice was wry and mildly, affectionately disapproving as she walked round the sofa with the honey in her hand; her voice trailed off when she saw him, “Jeff? Oh my god, honey are you ok?”

It was only then he realised he was shaking. It was difficult to swallow. When he took a breath it rattled and he couldn’t help but feel the tears against his cheeks that he hadn’t even realised were hiding there, waiting to fall.

“He used to make me choose,” he choked out, rubbing fitfully at his face as Susan sat down beside him quickly, hand on his back, face worried, “make me choose. Me or mom. And I always chose me because I couldn’t stand seeing her cry or hearing her scream. You know? I couldn’t stand it.”

“Oh Jeff, oh god honey,” Susan leaned in to wrap her arm around his shoulder and pull closer, as if she thought maybe she could shield him from it. She knew it all, he'd told her before about his biological father, when she'd been curious about the scars on his back. The ones she wouldn't let him laugh off.

“And I took it. And I took it and I took it and I knew I’d hate him for as long as I lived and it made me fucking strong and I’d never, never, *never* be like him. Never,” Jeff stopped for air and shook his head, feeling water dripping from his chin, “but it’s not never is it? It’s like...god it’s like he’s still in there. Still inside me waiting till I’m weak enough to give in and then it all falls back into place and suddenly I’m the one with the bottle in my hand and the power and I feel like...”

“It’s ok, it’s ok,” Susan was whispering over and over.

“I don’t-I *can’t* be that. I won’t. If I *ever* raised my hand to you, to Anthony,” Jeff closed his mouth and swallowed down the hysterical nausea, “god, I’d never forgive myself. I’d never forgive myself. I don’t want to be him, Susan. I can’t because...because I love you. I love you and I don’t want to lose you and that’s what’ll happen if I keep doing this.”

And the guilt shook him, rattled him like dead leaves on a gnarled tree, because he knew the betrayal was twofold and, right now, that was too much to handle.

"Honey," she was pressed against him now, arms wrapped tight, speaking against his shoulder as she stroked with a soothing, rhythmic press across his ribs, "it's ok. It's ok. You're not him, ok? You never will be because you're too damn kind. You're so kind, Jeff. Remember when I broke my ankle just after graduation and I was so upset because I couldn't go to any of my parties, stuck in that stupid leaky apartment for the summer with my leg in a cast? And you stayed with me, all that time. Brought me biscuits and brushed my hair and kissed me like it was going out of fashion. Even missed your dinner with that big marine biology professor, remember? You made me feel like a queen. You dropped the whole world for me. No one that kind could be so cruel. No one. I love you Jeff, I love you and I'm here and I'm not going anywhere, ok?"

And then he was in her arms, shaking like a leaf and trying his best not to break down because it was happiness, happiness for fear that was trying its best to pull him apart. They sat on the couch and held each other tightly, *just like they'd used to do in their little Chicago apartment, all twined together and laughing, kisses on bare skin*.

"And anyway," she said, laughing with a hint of a sob, "you'd never hit me, Jeff Milo, because I know where you sleep, and I know my way around the knife drawer better than you do."

Jeff laughed shakily and shook his head.

"Pretty sure I'd be dead meat."

"Totally dead meat," she agreed, grinning.

"I love you," he said, earnestly.

"I love you too. I love you even when you're a grouchy bastard in the morning. I love you when you're a slob in your office and you leave half drunk cold coffee mugs everywhere. I love you when you're a lazy shit on weekends and only clean up when I ask you to. Ok? I love you."

"God I don't deserve you," Jeff shook his head, smiling.

"No you don't," she smiled back, laughing; she leaned in and kissed him, soft and sweet and lingering. Jeff ran his hand softly down her arm, feeling the gentle, invisible hairs there.

A creaking sound, footsteps from somewhere. They both ignored it, staying in the quivering little bubble they'd been swallowed into. Separate from the world, just for a little while. He ran his hand over her arm again, and again, their foreheads leaning against each other. She kissed him, every time he got to her elbow. Jeff laughed softly on the fourth time. When he pulled back he looked at her, her blue eyes glassy from quick sympathy, worry still clinging to her face even as she smiled at him, her normally perfect hair slightly mussed.

"I forgot the milk," Jeff shrugged, making Susan laugh and shake her head.

“Oh Jeff, you’ve got a mind like a sieve. It’s ok, I can make something else.”

“No, no I’ll go out and get it now.”

“You don’t have to...”

“Honestly, it’s a fifteen minute run in the car,” he said, sniffing, looking down at his watch, “then I can swing by the nursery and pick up Tony. He’s out at half three so I might as well wait till he’s out.”

“Ok,” she said, reaching up to cup his right cheek, “thank you.”

“I think you’ve got that backwards,” Jeff said, “isn’t it me that should be saying that to you?”

“Now you’re just dumping sugar all over us,” she grinned, smacking his arm softly.

“I love you,” he said, smiling mischievously, sneaking in to kiss at her throat and hold her close, “I love you, I love you.”

And right then, in the haze of their mutually agreed happiness, he felt he could tell her that and mean it. He felt as if he could love them both, and have that be real. Accept that he could love Will just as much as he loved her, and that was just the way it was.

“Ah, stop it!” she squealed, “Don’t tickle me, Jeff Milo, or I swear I’ll scream.”

“Oh yeah?”

“AH! Ah I’ll scream stop it,” she laughed, scooting away and standing, flapping her hands, “you bastard. Go and get the milk before I make the neighbours call the police.”

“Ok,” he laughed, “anything for you my darling.”

He was half way to the front door, feeling so light on his feet he could barely breathe deep enough to fill his lungs, that he remembered he’d left his keys on the hook in the kitchen. *Everything was going to be alright.* It was a quick jog, adrenaline still pumping in his veins and singing in his ears, past the breakfast table and round to the little hook set above the cleaning cupboard by the backdoor. *Everything was going to be ok.*

It was as he snatched them up that something caught his eye, just visible through the long, slim window in the backdoor. Jeff stalled, moving closer and looking down at the wooden slats of the back porch. A stack of white paper, held down by a large, ocean smoothed stone.

Jeff licked his lips and felt his rapid heart slow. The door opened easily to reveal the pages, fluttering desperately as if trying to escape from under the heavy, grey mass of the stone. He hunkered down and held them tightly before rolling the stone aside. His own messy black marker was visible on all the sheets as they ruffled like a bird shaking its feathers.

Yet on the top most one, in a hand so neat that Jeff would have sworn it was typed out rather than handwritten, was a message in blue biro.

Apology accepted.
Please stop littering my porch.

He could almost hear Will's dry but humorous tone: enough to tell Jeff that Will thought he was being a prat, but always just enough to also tell Jeff that he didn't mind Jeff being a prat. Jeff crushed the sheets to his chest with both arms and laughed happily.

Everything was going to be ok.

Quendam Animi Motum Voluntarium

Chapter Summary

> “If you heat it too fast in the initial mixing process, it has a tendency to ignite. Did you know it’s naturally occurring? Produced in the central nervous system in point oh-oh-micrograms. You even get it in wine and spirits, in very small amounts. It’s a natural result of fermentation so...”
>
> “Hot stuff?”
>
> “Mmm?”
>
> “Shut up.”

Chapter Notes

> After the whole Hannibal feeding Abigail drugged tea thing in the series, just to see how she would react, I don't see him doing the same thing for Will to be too far fetched. Maybe that's just me.
>
> Also the title translation is: "A certain voluntary movement of the mind"

“...What did you say?”

“Am I not making sense?”

“I heard what you said Will, Jesus that’s not what I meant.”

“Oh. Good. I was worried I was slurring. It sometimes has that effect.”

“You’re kidding me, right?”

“Why would I be kidding?”

“Because...because you can’t be fucking serious!”

“Perfectly serious. Or as serious as I can be while this stupid crap is on the television.”

“Will...” Jeff tried to sit up from his sprawl on Will’s couch but the man atop him, lying on his back, head tucked under Jeff’s chin, made a fussy sound and shoved back, “Will I’m

fucking serious, what the hell did you take?"

"It's *fine*."

"It is not *fine*!" Jeff almost yelled, the last word quieting when Elle, running around happily in her new trainers that lit up at the heels, jangling with bells on her multicoloured, stripy dungarees, looked over to them with wide eyes; he continued in a sharp hiss, "Where the fuck did you get it. Will? I'm serious, fucking tell me."

"Stop swearing in front of Ellie," Will said, annoyed as he stretched like a cat, pushing Jeff back further even as the other man resisted.

"Stahp wearin'!" Ellie said loudly, mirroring her father, before she ran towards her bedroom with a bouncing giggle; ever since the mountains of sugary ice cream and sprinkles he'd shovelled into her, she'd been zipping about like a hyperactive chipmunk.

Once she was gone, Jeff continued "Says the man taking fucking drugs in front of her!" he snapped in reply, "Where the hell did you even get them?"

"I didn't. I made them myself."

Jeff couldn't even form a reply to that. He blinked down at what he could see of Will's relaxed face past the halo of unruly curls, getting long enough now to make it almost irresistible for Jeff to keep his hands off them. *Soft and messy and alluring;* kind of like the man they were attached to.

Except now, when the man they were attached to was apparently high off his face. Even the thought of it made Jeff's mind do a back flip, and not the impressive kind; an aborted, messy one that really hurt when you landed it. On your face.

An easy, obvious, childishly enjoyable day. That's what he had wanted it to be. Ever since the fight they no longer mentioned, and the apology Jeff had only just been able to scrape through and allow him to still count Will as a friend, Jeff was aware he'd been trying extra hard. Not only to be around, or *not* around if that's what Will needed, but also to be accommodating in every way. No talking about difficult things, no pressing issues, no bringing up bad habits. Just plain, good, old fashioned avoiding the issue, and so far it had worked perfectly.

So it was an easy, obviously good day which shouldn't have been an easy obviously good day, and that made it all the better that it *was;* because even though Susan and Anthony weren't home for the weekend, what with Susan taking their son to see her parents in Wyoming, the parents who disliked Jeff with the intensity of twin suns, Jeff didn't have to spend his days bumming about his empty house looking for things to do and feeling sorry for himself. No, he could go round to Will's and take him and *his* daughter out for ice cream and sandcastle building without the constant threat of being verbally castrated by a couple of crusty old fucks with more money than compassion.

He had felt a little sympathy for Susan, who was now stuck with her uptight omega mother and curmudgeonly alpha father for three whole days, but it had become a background thing.

Jeff's parents never made *her* feel like an irritating piece of gum stuck to your shoe that you just couldn't scrape off. So he'd decided to enjoy himself, because he felt like he needed it if not necessarily deserved it.

Thus, it had worked out (well in his world, at least) which had been great. He took his chance to live vicariously through someone else's enthusiasm for a change, because if there was one thing Eleanor Graham had in excess then it was enthusiasm.

A sunny morning spent watching as Eleanor had pointed and spluttered out half-shocked shouts while the sea consumed their impressive castle (Jeff on the manual labour of furious shovelling to build it to record height, Will on the reshaping into wonderful crenelations and windows and draw-bridges over moats and a central tower for Elle to decorate with seashells). Then driving into town to the sound of Stevie Wonder on his playlist, for ice cream in the midday heat; chocolate had gone down the best, though he'd blown through quite a few flavours just for the fun of seeing Eleanor's face screw up with a heartfelt 'bleh!' when she disliked something.

Perfect, he'd thought, *wonderfully, nostalgically perfect.*

Will had been quiet, but then Will was mostly quiet when out in public. The ice cream parlour, *he'd chosen Nandini's because they did fucking amazing sundaes*, had been packed of course. Making it worse he knew on Will's nerves, but the man had endured, cramped into the corner with a begrudging bowl of peppermint chocolate ripple with extra chocolate chips.

"*Come on, your favourite. I'm not getting you anything except your favourite."*

"I don't really want anything."

"And that's definitely not an option. Come on, Will, your favourite. Just tell me, it's my treat."

And they'd sat there together quite the thing, like a day trip in another life, and Jeff had grinned as Eleanor rambled at length about how cold the ice cream was even when it was runny, her face the picture of shock and excitement because apparently runny things were always hot, not cold, before moving on to enthuse about something else like saying the word wafer twenty three times in a row at the top of her lungs as she shook the offending object in her little hand like a culprit.

They'd had a good time, he'd thought. *A brilliantly carefree time*. Sure Will had been quiet, and Jeff could tell he was het-up, but Will had driven them home and invited him in and if Will had been pissed off enough then he generally just told Jeff to go home; so Jeff wasn't worried by Will's silence and his standoffishness. That was just Will, right? That was just his Will Graham. Truthfully, at the time he'd been unwilling to think beyond the idea of a sweet weekend of no work, no house chores beyond maybe chopping things for meals, avoiding emails from work, and doing beer runs. *Just like college all over again*, he'd grinned to himself.

What he hadn't expected was Will leaning in as they watched a lazy late afternoon film on the couch while Elle entertained herself with her crayons on the floor, singing surprisingly in tune along with whatever was going through her head. And then Will leaning in had

progressed to Will leaning *on*, and Jeff had been unable to help smiling as the man snuggled back against him, breathing out happily as he lay between Jeff's legs and against his chest.

Memories of his voice, thick with sleep, contentment and sex: 'nice, this is nice'. And Jeff hadn't been able to help inclining his head slightly to draw in that warm, unidentifiable scent Will sometimes effused, muttering out, "*you smell good today*" without thinking, to which Will had just smiled. Not that he was supposed to be thinking about stuff like that, because he and Will were just laying there together and that was that. Just friends, right? Just nice, comfortable friends.

Who, when asked how the heck they were able to lay together like this when Will normally couldn't stand to be touched, replied with *I took a couple of pills.* Which of course had led to now, with Jeff continuing to stare at Will incredulously until he began talking, all the while raving out of his mind at the implications.

"I'm a good chemist. You won't believe me, I know," Will continued through a yawn and a laugh, "it's just Gamma Hydroxybutyrate. Nothing serious. I wouldn't take it if I was alone. Hannibal used to make it for me, when something happened that I just couldn't cope with. Not easy seeing everything play out all over again. He understood that. Dead faces and memories of my hands doing the bad things," he yawned again and scratched at his face absently, "I used to end up curled into a ball in the bedroom cupboard sometimes, in the pitch dark. Couldn't even bear the thought of coming back out. This," Will waved at his languorous body, "always helped when nothing else could."

Listening to the soft, sleepy words was like being on the other side of the world. There was a rift there between them despite their bodies being pressed flush, *the rift of Will's past always sneaking in somehow*. Jeff didn't interrupt him, because his head was still swimming with the rush of information and the revelation of his sometimes-lover pulling a Walter White.

"One time I even convinced him to take it with me," Will was grinning now, wriggling down to get more comfortable, the supple lines of his body rubbing across Jeff's taught frame, pressing him further down, "that was laugh riot. We just couldn't stop laughing. Lying on the bed together laughing. I'd never seen him laugh so freely about something so trivial. Anyway," Will cleared his throat, "I'm a good chemist and I clean up after myself so stop hassling me will you? Right now it's the only thing allowing me to lie here without my nerves shaking themselves apart. So shut up and let's watch this till it wears off and I'm forced to get up and start coping on my own again."

There was a wailing siren from the television as the late Saturday afternoon film, *SWAT*, played out with swerving cars and gunfire. Jeff kept his eyes on Colin Farrell spewing ridiculous dialogue and tried to make sense of this. He could feel his heart hammering in his chest and his hands still curled into the sofa fabric. The little finger of his right hand found the hole between the back sofa cushions and worried it endlessly.

Eventually he managed to ask, "So you've done this before?"

"Mm hmm."

"And nothing ever went wrong?"

“Mm mmm,” Will hummed a negative as he shook his head.

“And you’d tell me, if anything felt like it had gone wrong.”

“Jeff.”

“I’m serious Will, just...please.”

“Yes I’d tell you. But I don’t need to, because everything is fine.”

It was difficult to take that and accept it, because he knew he was a worrier and this wasn’t something he was used to, he’d never hung around with the people at college who smoked pot or used GHB and poppers and the usual light, party drugs, and he wouldn’t even know how to tell if Will had taken too much or what to do if he had without calling an ambulance and then *shit* Will would be fucked and Child Services would be involved and *fuck that* and this was all happening because Will was taking drugs and Will was *making* drugs and Will had laughed on the bed with his husband like schoolboys on drugs, and fuck fucking Hannibal Lecter anyway, corrupting Will like this and...

“Jeff.”

“What?” he asked, feeling a little breathless as the adrenaline pumped through his veins. Eleanor rolled off on quick feet, shouting something about *choo choo trains go wee wee!* as she reappeared from her bedroom and ran into Will’s bedroom in a flash. Seconds later Jeff could hear the sound of the Newton’s Cradle on Will’s nightstand clicking and clacking as Elle set it off and clapped along.

“Jeff,” Will chuckled dreamily; he shifted about as Jeff continued to keep one eye on the film, one eye on Will’s lithe form draped atop him and his entire mind on the horror scenarios in his head making his blood run hot, “*Jeff* that really isn’t comfortable.”

“Huh?”

“It’s like lying on a tree root,” Will muttered as he shifted again, suddenly rubbing hard against the trapped erection between them that Jeff hadn’t even realised he was sporting.

“Jesus,” Jeff breathed out in a rush, guilt riding him even as he swallowed, “well you’re not helping now, are you?”

“How’d this become *my* fault?” Will asked, eyebrow raised.

“Well who the hell else would it be for, huh?”

“Sam Jackson?” Will was smiling properly now, behind his hand, as he used the other wave at the television.

“You’re a cheeky shit, you know that?” Jeff asked.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“I know,” Will yawned again and reached down behind him, pushing his hand out of sight between their tightly pressed bodies and casually down into Jeff’s pants.

“*Jesus!*” Jeff rushed out, low but flustered; he grabbed Will’s wrist, “Stop it, will you? You’re *really* not helping.”

“You don’t want a hand with that?”

“No,” Jeff said as if it were obvious, “you’re not thinking straight. I’m not that much of a bastard.”

Laughter; that was what he was met with. Loud and wide and accompanied by a smile that went all the way up into Will’s eyes; enough that it really should have killed the erection in his pants dead. Jeff just decided that having Will’s clever fingers still twitching about so close to his nether regions simply wouldn’t *allow* his hard on to dissolve from sheer mortification.

“Are you...” another, slightly more restrained, laugh as Will pulled his hand from Jeff’s grasp and brought it back to the couch, “are you taking advantage of me, Mr. Milo?”

“Shut up Will, I’m serious ok?”

“Well if you want to be a gentleman about it,” Will said sarcastically, leaning his head back and to the right to speak into his ear. All Jeff could see was the long, smooth curve of Will’s throat hovering temptingly before his lips, “the bathroom’s over there.”

It was embarrassing because he hadn’t been able to say no, or yes, or even no-but-really-yes. It was embarrassing because just having Will’s neck so close to his mouth had made him instinctually feel like baring his teeth and worrying that smooth flesh until Will moaned and submitted and let him flip them over and...

Fucking bathroom, he’d decided quickly, getting up and hurrying uncomfortably with tented shorts, locking the door behind him with shaky hands.

And now it was embarrassing because he knew that Will knew what he was doing, standing in his bathroom with his lip bitten to keep all the unsavoury sounds in. *And it was fucking arousing as hell because he knew that Will knew he was in his bathroom, furiously jerking off to the feel of Will still pressed against him, throat long and sleek and bared just for him as he breathed words into his ear like a teasing lover.*

In that fantasy, rather than ‘the bathroom’s over there’ Will probably said something like ‘the bedroom’s just over there’ or ‘I’ve been aching for you all day’. That’s what Jeff tried out as he stroked and worked his cock and tried to imagine long, slim calloused fingers instead of his own smooth, tanned ones. Something easy and accessibly provocative. Something that Will would definitely never say, he was sure but then his imagination wasn’t exactly working on full capacity as his body sent all the useful blood rushing from brain to groin.

Knowing Will, his come-on's would be suitably blunt and challenging but with a hint of dark humour. Something like 'ever wanted to see what a man who used to think about killing people for a living does in bed?'

Fuck it, Jeff thought as he came into the toilet tissues wrapped across the head of his throbbing cock and bit down on his index finger, even something like that was hot as hell when slipping from between those beautiful fucking lips. *You're a doomed man, Jeff Milo*, he told himself, *perpetually fucking doomed.*

"Hope you washed your hands," Will said, still lying on the couch and trying to keep a straight face; he was unable to hold back as Jeff sat back down grouchily at Will's feet, listening to his soft laughter.

"You're a sick man, Graham."

"You don't know the half of it. So what were you thinking about?"

"*What?"* Jeff wasn't proud of the timbre of his voice as he replied.

"When you just masturbated," Will said wryly, raising an eyebrow, "in my bathroom."

"Christ, why do I fucking..?" Jeff muttered, "None of your damn business."

"Oh? It is my business, I gave you the privilege."

"I'm pretty sure I gave *myself* the privilege."

"You used my toilet tissue."

"Will for crying out loud."

"And I was the one who had to sit and listen to you biting your tongue so as not to make a sound, even though you still did."

"How the hell could you possibly have heard that?"

"I muted the TV," Will shrugged, smiling smugly.

"Christ, you're funny on this stuff."

"I know," Will's smile was a little lopsided, seeming like a completely different person from the quiet, introverted, uptight statue he'd been at the ice cream parlour, "it's an un... an un-inhibitor?" Will suggested, before making an awkward sound and shaking his head a little, "No, that's not a word is it. It makes you uninhibited, emotionally. Works as a sedative in heavy enough doses. Can cause very mild audio and visual hallucinations. I could walk you through the technical stuff, if you like. $C_4H_8O_2$," Will said as he drew the seemingly simple molecular structure in the air with his right index finger, "If you heat it too fast in the initial mixing process, it has a tendency to ignite. Did you know it's naturally occurring? Produced in the central nervous system in point oh-oh-micrograms. You even get it in wine and spirits, in very small amounts. It's a natural result of fermentation so..."

“Hot stuff?”

“Mmm?”

“Shut up.”

Will licked his lips and smiled, “As far as it goes for me, it makes me like to talk. A lot.”

“You don’t say. You never speak like this unless you’re drunk, but then you’re usually too slurry by this point. On this stuff,” Jeff begrudgingly admitted, “at least I can understand you.”

Normally Jeff loved to listen to Will talk shop. He was a fascinating treasure trove of in depth knowledge and Jeff was always up for that, *technical oddities and little known facts.* However, he mainly enjoyed it because Will let go when he became enthusiastic. He relaxed without seeming to notice what he was doing, slipping into an easy, teaching rhythm while his eyes shone and he gestured freely and smiled without thinking.

Once he’d allowed Will to tell him about the entire history of dermatoglyphics for three hours, ending with Will naming each minutiae of the ridges and whorls on Jeff’s fingers, their hands almost but never quite touching. This, however, was too close to home. There was a difference between hearing about something enthralling, and hearing about something enthralling that your friend was currently *on*.

“You’re avoiding the question Milo,” Will said, pulling him back into the moment.

“Of course I am,” Jeff sighed tiredly even as Will stretched out and put his feet in his lap, relaxing back against the sofa, “because it’s juvenile and pointless and I’m not going to answer it.”

“Even if I do this?” Will asked absently while he watched the screen, bending his right knee in order to rub the ball of his foot against Jeff’s overly-sensitised crotch.

“Fuck, ah! Son of a bitch,” Jeff pushed him away, “don’t. Fucking Christ, sexually harassed by an ex-FBI agent. I’ll put it in my diary, alright? Just stop it.”

“Killjoy,” Will yawned again, trying again with his other foot.

“Fuck’s sake,” Jeff groaned; partly because it really was too much, and partly because it was coming seriously close to setting him off again; *what am I, fifteen?* he chastised himself, “Fine, fucking hell. I’ll answer your stupid question, if you answer mine.”

“Mmm?” Will asked, still watching the film even with the sound lowered.

“Why’d you get so pissed today?”

“What? When?”

“At the ice cream place. We were having a good time and then suddenly you shut up and stayed shut up.”

“You were having a good time. Eleanor was having the time of her life. I was just happy you were both happy. And I wasn’t pissed, as you so crudely put it.”

“Yeah, you were,” Jeff pressed, “when I asked you what your favourite flavour of fucking ice cream was you stared a hole in my head. I mean if you really didn’t want any, you should have just said.”

“It wasn’t that,” Will frowned in irritation, still refusing to meet his eyes.

“Then what?” Jeff prodded playfully, “My mouth is sealed until you...”

“Peppermint creams are my favourite.”

“Uh, yeah. I kind of figured.”

“Well then.”

“Well then what?”

But Will was still talking, as if he hadn’t heard Jeff’s reply, “Always the same box,” Will managed to sound distant even as he remained utterly pragmatic, as if he were talking to himself and Jeff and someone else entirely all at once, “Black with forest green and gold letters. Those ones. God, now I can’t remember the name. C? B, think it begins with a B but I can’t...” Will chewed at his thumb nail, “Sixteen perfect little discs of seventy percent with real peppermint essence in the fondant. And those words exactly, *your favourite, darling, my treat.* Spoiled. I think I was spoiled, you know.”

“The hell are you talking about?” Jeff asked, laughing a little more as a nervous tick than for any real humour.

“You’re a smart guy, Milo, don’t act like you’re a moron with no clue,” Will said without compunction, snapping back to reality.

It was the truth, only Jeff was quite willing to be clever enough to know what Will was getting at, but stupid enough to believe that if he ignored it that it would go away.

“Wow, thanks for that,” Jeff replied dryly, “and for making no sense whatsoever.”

“Forget it Milo.”

“And it’s Jeff, by the way.”

“Just *forget it*.”

“Fine,” Jeff said with a terse sigh, “it’s forgotten.”

Will pulled his feet away and curled up, until they were no longer touching. Jeff leaned forwards to snag the remote from the coffee table and turn off mute. By the time Eleanor reappeared he was sure they both looked like sulking toddlers. Or at least, that was probably

what he looked like. Will seemed more like an angry cat, curled into a ball, eyes closed. Jeff hadn't prodded further, even to apologise.

Eleanor, on the other hand, needed none of that caution.

"Daddy," she said as she shook his arm, "daddy there's piders in th'bushies."

Opening his eyes Will looked at her. Smiling softly he hooked his arm around the back of her head and pulled her close for a kiss against her cheek. Always that same kindness, the same look every time he laid eyes on her; *as if remembering reasons he had to be happy.* She jumped up and down as she pulled back and Will ruffled her hair.

"What's that kiddo?"

"Big fat piders!" she pointed with one hand while tugging at her father's shirt with the other, "Out the winnow. See?"

"Sure, you show me."

"They migh come into th'haus an'-an'-an' then..." she took a moment to look serious, far too serious for a toddler approaching two, but ran out of words as if unsure as to why she should be worried about the spiders coming inside in the first place. Will allowed her to lead him off, not once looking back.

An innocent with no real idea of sadness and loss, the way all kids should be Jeff thought. Someone to whom all the world was available because new sights or ideas or sounds or words were like bright light bulbs illuminating the outline of a universe of possibilities, *not bright lights to highlight all the undesirable and unwanted vagaries of life that adults saw*. He missed that. That enthusiasm for everything around you, enough that you couldn't bear the thought of going to bed when there was still so much to *do*.

And now here he was, sitting on the couch with resentment and anger and guilt tying him down. Where had that feeling gone? He wanted to ask himself why he couldn't have it back. What was the point of growing up if all it did was show you the horrors waiting there, destroying the *unabashed inquisitiveness* and *endless optimism* and *only being sad for trivial things like dropping ice creams and barking dogs*?

Now all those veils had been torn down, trodden into an inscrutable past. Leaving them vulnerable, dented, avoiding nothing but ghosts and bad memories. He could see it in the way Will couldn't even bear the thought of something beautiful and precious from his past, even as he held it to himself fiercely with jealous fingers.

And those words exactly, he heard Will say, *your favourite, darling, my treat.* Someone else's words , tainting Jeff's own unknowing attempt at careless kindness. Turning the open plane of life into a constant minefield, where nothing could be spontaneous or carefree without running the risk of triggering pain, like fireflies in the dark, winking in and out to give only a flash of understanding.

Everyone has their demons, Jeff thought, *those that carry us back are memories, and those that carry us forward are the beautiful dreams of youth destined to fall prey to 'growing up'.*

At six o'clock the pack returned. The thump of paws and the sound of claws tick-tacking about on the back porch was the first alert to dinner time. Jeff looked awkwardly over his shoulder from his seat at the coffee table as he played a dull but at least time consuming game of solitaire while the TV droned in the background. The dogs circled each other and panted at the windows, tails wagging. Angel led them dutifully, her coat now scraggly but grown in enough to cover the worst of her bald patches.

Behind her was Buster, the Jack Russell cross that Will had rescued a month ago tied up at a lay by on the motorway, red raw rope at his throat and fear in his eyes, *now gone in place of excitement at the thought of food*. Bringing up the rear was the most recent addition, Lenny the tan pit-bull; apparently Will had gone for a walk a few weeks ago with the gang, and Lenny had just come over to say hi as they walked past the ice cream van. When the van owner had begun shooing Lenny away Will had realised he didn't have a collar. He had bought a couple of wafers from the guy which Lenny devoured hungrily before quite happily following them home.

A couple of times Jeff had wanted to say something about Will's sudden want to collect the weary and woeful. So far, he hadn't managed it.

"The pack's back," he called through to Will in the kitchen.

"I hear it. Open the door for me?"

"Sure."

He was assaulted by happy faces, licking tongues and wagging tails as the dogs squeezed through even before the door was fully open. A steadily growing collection of strays; *one big happy family*. Jeff hoped Will didn't try and overcompensate too much, or he'd run out of room pretty quick.

"Where do they sleep?" Jeff joked from the kitchen doorway.

"My room," Will said as he filled their bowls and ignored the whines, pushing Lenny down as the eager dog jumped up to put his paws on the counter.

"Not on the bed though, right?"

"Sure on the bed."

"Will, that's nasty."

"No it's not," Will sent him a despairing look.

He hadn't argued the point. Jeff tended to be wary of being balshy after he and Will had a disagreement. That the last one was more of a train wreck than a disagreement made him extra cautious. He knew his last apology had been accepted, eventually, but the thought of being stonewalled like that again was miserable, so much so that he tended to steer clear of confrontation.

So they'd had dinner, *roast chicken with all the trimmings for them, chicken, potato and carrot mash for Eleanor with jelly to follow*. He and Will had fallen to talking about the flyers for pre-schools that were starting to come through Will's door. Which had led to talking about school, and high school and memories of what it was like trying to fit in.

Jeff had hated high school because he always fell in with the wrong crowd of alphas and ended up as the toady. Will had enjoyed never having to attend one high school long enough to have friends at all, what with his dad hauling him around the country on a never ending trek. Then university, which Jeff had loved for its safe cocoon from the outside world, and which Will had loved for the ability to absorb vast amounts of information so quickly. When Will found out that Jeff had his doctorate he had given him an odd look.

'So you're Dr. Jeffrey Milo. Never brought that up before.'

'Don't really think about it anymore. I'm so used to being around doctors in the Institute that the title's luster wears thin pretty quick,' Jeff shrugged, smiling as he added, 'So, does it make me more stately and less slovenly?

'No,' Will said, taking a drink of water, 'it makes you familiar.'

When Will said he was taking the dogs for a walk, Jeff tagged along without asking if he could. Mainly because if Will said he'd rather go alone Jeff was worried he'd start one of those arguments he was trying so desperately to avoid.

Also it was a good opportunity for a smoke. He'd been doing his best to cut down, but he still needed his fix. The night time cig was crucial, just as his reserves were flagging.

It was a clear evening, the sun hanging just against the horizon as if clinging on for dear life. High clouds like scraped white paint against the ceiling of the sky, caught the last of the light in luminescence against the dark blue backdrop. The dogs ran the length of the beach and back on a loop, sniffing at the hermit crabs coming out to wander through the seaweed, barking at seagulls, chasing sticks that Jeff could find to throw before playing tug-o-war with the victory. After a couple of minutes Eleanor started whining about being tired and Will picked her up, carrying her cuddyback style until she was fast asleep against his neck, head nodding lazily, little boots dangling by Will's waist.

Jeff couldn't help but smile at the image; the kind of snapshot *Dynamics Quarterly* would probably have on the cover. The prototypical omega and their pup. Jeff lifted his hands when Will wasn't looking, making a frame with his fingers to wrap around them. *A photo-finish look at the ideal of life*. Only it was never so ideal was it? No one knew what hid behind the pictures, even in the happy moments.

“You planning on taking anymore of these mangy animals that keep turning up on your doorstep?” Jeff asked as he reached back and launched the piece of driftwood through the air for Lenny and Buster, both dogs dancing on their paws before shooting off after the long stick, “I swear it’s like the word’s gotten out in the stray network that you’re adopting wholesale.”

“Depends,” Will said.

“On what?”

No reply didn’t mean Will didn’t have one, just that he had one he didn’t really want to give. Jeff wanted to press further but held his tongue. *In his own time, Will always talked in his own time*. Jeff knew that was the mantra he’d always used since meeting the man, but recently it had started to sound like an excuse. Will was his friend, why shouldn’t he be allowed to urge a little reciprocation?

“Bit of a rag-tag family, huh?” Jeff said after they reached the curve of the next bay, a long finger of sand stretching out into the low tide that was starting to turn; they watched the sun struggle for a moment before dipping down and disappearing for the night, making the sky above it flare in turquoise and orange.

“I suppose,” Will turned around and began heading home, Jeff and the mutts following.

“Were you an only child?”

“What?” Will asked, looking to him sharply.

“An only child. Were you? Only I’ve never heard you talk about brothers or sisters.”

“...Yes,” Will sounded unreasonably wary.

“Me too. Always wanted a dog, you know? Something like an older sibling, aren’t they. Only better I always thought,” Jeff grinned, “the whole unconditional love thing instead of sibling rivalry, dead arms and scrappy fights and insects dangled in your face.”

Will shrugged Eleanor up a little higher. The tumble of brown curls and sleepy eyes sighed, grunted, but stayed fast asleep. Jeff felt the tinge of irritation that always came when Will clammed up. Made him impossible to read. Jeff hated to feel like his conversation was seen as boring, an inconvenience, that the other person might be wishing you would just shut it and leave.

Nothing worse than being ignored.

“Yeah, always wanted a dog. Never had one,” Jeff continued regardless, trying to lose the tight tone, “dad wouldn’t let me,” he knew it was a half lie, because his father probably hadn’t known half the time what the hell Jeff wanted or didn’t want, or wouldn’t have cared even if he had, “I think Elle will appreciate it though. Now she’s got two big brothers and a big sister too. Can’t be better than that, right?”

“She had...” Will was lit by the dying sunset as he took a long breath and spoke again, “she had a twin.”

“Who?” Jeff asked, blindsided by the statement.

“A twin sister. Eleanor. She...” Will opened his eyes and managed to catch Jeff’s stare for a moment before the connection was lost again, “Charlotte. Her name was Charlotte.”

The word *was* had never been so cold. Jeff closed his mouth and kept it closed. *Christ*. Over a year. He’d known Will for over a year now. It was a strange surge of feeling heatedly alienated and yet guiltily sad. Jeff didn’t do bereavement well, wasn’t exactly known for tact on cue. It made him nervous, and when he was nervous he tended to put his foot in it. So his mouth-stayed-closed. For better or worse.

And Will said nothing further as they walked home, footsteps sunk into the sand.

Home and dry, the dogs scampered to the bedroom once Will had scrubbed their paws with a sandy towel by the door. Jeff had taken Eleanor to bed and made silly jokes while she sat in amongst her stuffed toy elephants and teddy bears, rubbing at her sleepy eyes and giggling. Seeing her smile just made it easier, that was all. He wondered if it was the same for Will.

When Will came through to get her ready, Jeff had backed off. *No way of even comprehending how to begin dealing with this,* he thought, *what if I fuck up? No fixing that with an apology. Christ. Fucking Christ I wish he’d told me sooner.*

When his mobile rang Jeff nearly jumped out of his skin, he’d been so distracted. The ringtone was overly loud in the quiet house, and he answered quickly to stem the noise.

“Hello?” he answered hastily.

“Hi baby,” Susan’s voice; Jeff stalled like a learner driver at a junction, unsure what to say, “Sorry, I tried calling earlier but you didn’t pick up. We just got in about a couple of hours ago.”

“We, uh, we were out too. Ice cream. It’s really hot here, how about you?”

“*Oh* yeah,” she said, the sound of voices in the background, “like in the nineties. And what did I forget?”

Jeff took a moment to let his mind rush about for the answer, even as he looked over his shoulder at the corridor surreptitiously. He could hear Will leaving Elle’s bedroom and heading to his own, “Uh, sun cream?”

“Bingo! Cost an arm and a leg too, bought it at the airport. So you went out for ice cream? Did you go to Visocchi’s?”

“Nandinis,” he corrected, rubbing at his neck; *get off the fucking phone Jeff*, he told himself, *get off the phone for fucks sake*.

“Ah, sundaes,” she said with understanding, “did you have one?”

“Hot chocolate caramel,” he said, even though he hadn’t, it had been banana and toffee. He found himself saying anything to make this sound like a normal conversation, ending up with a suspicious and odd lilt to his tone.

“Yum. Sounds amazing. You go with Will and Eleanor?”

“Uh huh. Yeah. It was a nice day. Feeling a bit lonely here in this big, empty house.”

“I’m sorry honey. I wish I wasn’t so far away,” her voice lowered and the sound of voices drifted a little further away, “mom and dad are driving me crazy already. Can you believe they’re quizzing me on Anthony’s prospects? I mean he’s three and a half and they’re acting like I need to book him a place at Harvard. Wish you were here. I’m gonna be pretty lonely later on.”

“Me too,” Jeff swallowed, the words sticking like a knife in his gullet; *liar, fucking liar*.

Then a voice from the background, *“Susan, sweetheart, could you come help your father with this new sky box? He’s hopeless and he won’t listen to me.”*

“Sure thing mom, just give me a second! I better go before they set fire to something. Dad just got Sky and he’s determined that he’s become a techno wiz. I’m sure you can guess how well that’s going.”

“About as well as me when I say the same thing?” Jeff joked.

“Worse,” Susan said, despairing; there was a pause, where neither spoke. Jeff felt it like a millstone around his neck, “well, ok then. I’ll give you a call tomorrow when we’re free, ok?”

“Look forward to it.”

“And if you get lonely,” her voice took on an indecent tone, volume lowering, “call me later?”

“I will. Love you.”

“Love you too,” *a voice shouting “I know how it works, Valerie, god woman!”*, before Susan laughed out, “Bye.”

It was pushing nine by the time Will came back to the living room. Jeff knew he must look like shit, because he felt like shit. He felt like another cigarette, or twenty, but was trying to hold onto anything just to keep a modicum of self respect by not giving in. He’d decided to stop being such a push over and just have a coffee instead when Will began turning on the living room lights.

“Hey, look, I was going to make some coffee. You want one?”

“Offering me my own coffee now?” Will asked as he let down the blinds.

“Pretty much,” Jeff said, a nervous laugh through his words.

The cafetiere took five minutes to soak the thickly ground coffee, giving off a welcome bitter aroma, and also an excuse to stand around in the kitchen on his own and not have to deal with reality. *Maybe I can ask him if he wants to talk about it?* Jeff thought, moments later berating himself, *Yeah, sure, great topic of conversation there Jeff.* When hands appeared at his sides he jumped on instinct, looking over his shoulder as Will pressed against him, arms slipping round his waist, forehead tucked into the nape of his neck. He hadn't even heard him enter.

"Will," he said uselessly, "uh, you ok?"

"Mmm. Who was that on the phone?"

"Susan. She was just letting me know they got in ok and, well, yeah. Coffee'll be another couple of minutes."

"Fuck the coffee Jeff."

Four words that threw his half-baked plans into the fire. A long breath puffed out his chest, before letting it out deflated him. *I'm sorry*, he wanted to say, but it was so inadequate that he couldn't bear to. Instead he focused on the body against his and the hands clasping him close.

"You taken more of that stuff?"

"Mm hmm."

"How much more?"

"I'm not on suicide watch," he said wryly.

"Oh yeah? Remember how we met?" cringing as he realised how fucking insensitive a joke it had been; *this is why I shouldn't be allowed to talk.*

"Fuck you."

"Well... yeah. Ok. Sorry," beginning to ramble again, "I fucking deserved that, really, I..."

"Jeff?"

"What?"

"Take me to bed."

No holds barred, another four little words that seemed to turn the heat up. For a few moments Jeff felt envious of Will's ability to just say what he wanted, unlike Jeff who was left a nervous wreck at the mention of a difficult topic, at having the reality of his infidelity inescapably shoved into his face and rubbed there like a puppy into its own mess to teach it a lesson.

Although I'm pretty sure I'd be mouthing off like a lunatic if I were on it too, he tried to reason, turning in Will's hold until they were face to face. He opened his mouth to reply but

only then realised he wasn't sure what to say and closed it again. Will watched him, his eyes slightly glassy, as Jeff tried again and failed.

"I swear to god if you make an excuse about me being high or too upset or taking advantage of me I'll take this moment to remind you I still own a gun," Will said dryly.

Jeff kept his lips parted as he looked into Will's eyes. *Pain and exhaustion and memories he probably couldn't avoid and hell this had all been Jeff's fault in the first place for bringing it up, even if he hadn't meant to and now...*

...and now he was doing the one thing he shouldn't be, the thing he was trying to pretend was obligation, like with the cigarettes, being a better man and keeping this friendly even as he loved him because this wasn't the present he'd wanted or the future he'd expected...

The internal monologue continued unheeded as Jeff leaned in before his thoughts took over, putting his lips to Will's ear, making the other man shiver.

"Can the dogs sleep in the living room? Don't think it would do my performance any good to have an audience."

The bedroom was vacated with a quick, almost frenzied shooing of disappointed dogs out to close the door tightly shut behind them. Jeff wasted no time as Will reached out and grabbed at the hem of his t-shirt, pulling it up, reciprocating by undoing the buttons on Will's shirt with unsteady fingers. He broke away to allow Will to pull his t-shirt up and off before accepting the kiss, quick and heated, as Will shrugged out of his own.

Days and hours and packs of cigarettes and words said in confidence and words written down and words rubbed out or scrunched up and thrown in the bin and promises to himself and promises to others and wishes that he could be real or be better or be worthy of the people that trusted him and take what he wanted and love who he wanted and, in the end, none of it mattered.

None of it mattered, because Will would never need him the way he needed Will; but Jeff could live with that. Without that, he would have nothing but the title of neighbour and the occasional wave from mutual driveways or as their kids played together as they grew up and *god* but Jeff couldn't stand the thought of being just-friends.

Just in the way he could no longer stand the idea of just-sex.

They half fell, half stumbled onto the bed, entwined. It creaked under the abuse, making Will laugh softly, easily. When Jeff leaned in and kissed at Will's neck with an open mouth, sucking until he could feel the blood rushing against his lips, he wondered why he'd ever bothered trying to fool himself. The soft groan vibrated against his mouth as Will writhed out of his jeans and made fast work of Jeff's fly.

"In a hurry?" Jeff joked quietly.

When Will took hold of Jeff's right hand and sucked the index and middle fingers into his mouth without warning, Jeff pulled in a breath so fast that he nearly choked on it. Lying

between Will's splayed legs, their naked erections grinding against each other as Will's soft, moist mouth suckled at his fingers, Jeff thought he was going to embarrass himself early.

"Jesus Christ," he muttered as Will cocked his hips up, "what are you doing?"

"I don't like the idea of you going in dry," Will said perfunctorily once he'd pulled the fingers free; keeping hold of Jeff's hand he pulled it down as he bent his leg at the knee and brought it up. Jeff was forced to almost lie atop him as Will led his fingers down and down until...

Jeff swallowed, feeling a little light headed; the memory of Will spread on the bed as he touched himself, sliding his fingers deeper inside, had Jeff eager for air, "This is what you want?"

"This is what I want," Will said bluntly as he pushed at his wrist, forcing Jeff to press the pads of his fingertips against Will's entrance.

"I've never..."

"Fucked a guy in the ass?"

"Wow, *no*, I mean, shit," Jeff breathed out as he shivered, braced himself and then pushed without warning; Will inhaled sharply, clenching and unclenching around him, "never done this with anyone before."

"Oh," Will breathed out, licking his lips as he stared up at the ceiling, "coincidence. Me neither."

"What?" Jeff asked sharply, suddenly feeling completely out of his depth, "I thought..."

"Thought what?"

"Well...I mean, you were married."

"You're married too Jeff," Will pointed out, looking up at him.

"You were married to a *guy*," leaning closer he kissed at Will's clavicle to try and hide his nerves, moving over the crater-like scar of the bullet wound; Will just shrugged, making Jeff lick his lips, "then how do we do this?"

"You're asking me?" Will laughed a little as Jeff began flexing his wrist, moving his fingers cautiously in and out, "This is as far as I've ever gone before."

"You sure you want more?"

"This is an odd conversation," Will noted almost absently as he pulled Jeff closer and pressed down against his hand, forcing the penetration deeper.

"You're telling me," Jeff breathed out, captivated by the sight of Will beneath him, open and beautiful and uninhibited, biting his bottom lip as his breathing sped up.

They kissed, because at least they knew how that worked. Long and deep, for as long as they could bear it without coming up for air. Jeff continued the steady, vigilant rhythm until he felt Will slowly relax. By the time Will was panting and mumbling incoherently, Jeff knew he'd pushed it as far as he could go.

"Want you," Will was breathing against the skin of his shoulder, making Jeff's own erection jump and tremble just at the feeling, "now."

"You don't have anything to make this easier?" he asked because he was sure it's what he should be asking, right? He groaned as Will's teeth scraped his skin, "I mean, like lubricant or anything?"

"No."

"Will, you're so fucking unhelpful."

"I know."

"Fuck."

"Jeff..."

"Fuck, this is..."

"Here."

And it all spiralled quite quickly out of control as Will reached down to still his furiously working hand and pulled him free. Long fingers wrapped around his cock, guiding him by feeling rather than sight. Jeff kept eye contact rigidly as he felt the head of his cock press against hot skin.

"I'm sorry, if I hurt you," he spluttered out.

The kiss didn't dispel the anxiety or the raging arousal or make any of this alright, but it helped. Will gripped him tightly as he pushed inside, savouring the undeniable euphoria of the tight, hot, spongy heat that enveloped him in one, long movement. Will gasped into his mouth, allowing Jeff to swallow the moan he let loose and mix it with his own, mindless words.

"Fucking hell," he breathed, forehead resting against Will's own, "fucking hell," he managed to reach up and run his hand shakily across Will's cheek, "you ok?"

A quick series of nods and Will's eyes fluttered closed, his lips slightly parted as he breathed steadily. When he shifted his hips Jeff reached down to hold him still as the movement flared through him like wildfire. For a moment they adjusted to the feel of each other. Jeff thought he could feel Will's heart beating through his hand he'd taken from Will's face and pressed against his chest.

"Planning on moving any time soon?" came Will's slightly amused, quiet voice.

“Cheeky shit.”

It became less of an event and more of a fumbling, messy coupling that ended in frenzied rutting. At one point Jeff became aware of the fact that the headboard was hitting against the wall rather loudly, enough that he was glad Will didn’t have neighbours or it would have been pretty hard to explain. When he changed angle half way through and reached down to stroke Will in time with his thrusts, Will began moaning unabashedly, making Jeff fumble with his other hand to press his fingers over his mouth and hush him, worried he’d wake the kid sleeping two rooms over.

It was a chaotic, amateur, awkward jumble of bodies and desire that, as far as Jeff was concerned, felt utterly, mind-blowingly amazing.

Will came first, with accompanying scratches across Jeff’s back deep enough to make him curse through the pain. Jeff rode it out, even as Will cupped his cheeks and kissed his lips softly again and again while Jeff bucked his hips wildly out of time.

“Son of a *god dammit*,” he ground out as quietly as he could, curling up and down to mold himself around the still man beneath him as he finished.

Normally he flopped after sex, a natural impulse from his quaking, tired muscles. This time he was considerate enough to pull gently free and roll to the side, because he felt like Will deserved better. Probably had better than this, once. *Spoiled*. Jeff rubbed at his face with both hands, ending up with his fingers pressed against his closed eyes. *I’m a fucking moron aren’t I. Yeah. Yeah I am.*

They lay together, breathing deeply and staring up at the ceiling. Jeff traced the long, only just visible crack that ran from the bottom right corner out into the middle of the room where the main light hung down. After a few moments an arm slid over his torso, and then a warm, sweaty body pressed against his left side. Jeff looked down and watched as Will curled up against him. There was a lingering seriousness in the air that Jeff couldn’t stand.

‘If you get lonely, call me later’

‘Charlotte. Her name was Charlotte’

‘I will. Love you’

‘Your favourite, darling, my treat.’

A real fucking moron, Jeff Milo, he agreed as the thoughts continued to run rampant in his head like inner demons, cackling and tormenting. He closed his eyes and lifted his left arm, curling it around Will’s shoulder and rubbing at the wet skin beneath his palm.

“So, I’m almost scared to ask...” he opened, trying his best to lighten the mood.

“Good, Jeff,” Will laughed tiredly, rubbing his cheek against the hair on Jeff’s chest, “really, really good.”

“Oh,” he smiled on impulse at the compliment, “always a confidence builder.”

“You?”

“You seriously don’t even have to ask,” Jeff admitted.

“I can assume?” Will was smiling, he could hear it in his voice.

“Assume away, hot stuff.”

“Then I’ll assume it blew your mind.”

“You’re good at this.”

“Not the first time I’ve been told that.”

A car went past outside. Will nuzzled Jeff’s shoulder, pulling himself closer. The heat was oppressive and his body tickled with prickling sweat. *Still he didn’t move*.

"It was you, by the way."

"Hmm?" Will asked, rubbing slow circles against Jeff's abdomen.

"In the bathroom," he said with a small smile, "earlier. I was thinking about you."

"Me?"

"You."

"I'm flattered," Will said, kissing at his skin, grinning with his eyes closed, "was I good?"

"You're always good, beautiful."

Jeff wished they could stay like this for hours, just lying there talking and touching and maybe even being up for more later because he felt like a horny teenager around Will, he felt vigorous and protective and young. *It was just a fact that it could never last, enough to make him hold Will closer.*

"I..." Will hesitated; Jeff could feel him swallowing against his skin, Adam's apple pressing against his ribs as his grin faded, "I was thinking about...about a lot of things. Earlier. That's why I was angry. Thinking about what I was trying to do, getting Eleanor back and now she's here with me and I was," Will sighed, slowing his words as they threatened to run off without him, "trying to make sure I'd done the right thing having her with me."

"You're crazy," Jeff said, "fucking crazy. You're good for her. She loves you and I know you love her too."

"I just wanted her to have a family."

"Will..."

"She, uh, Charlotte, she was stillborn you see,” Will was talking like he had before, as if there were more than one listener, and as if he couldn't stop, “complications from...from lots of

things. I didn’t even get to see her. Never saw her, they took her to a table I couldn’t see and then...then little Eleanor comes along right behind her and...” Will smiled a little fitfully, laughing, high pitched as he spoke, “makes a mess, like she likes to do so much. And thank Christ for surgeons, is all I’ll say, because she wouldn’t have made it out without them and I sure as hell wouldn’t have either."

Jeff stayed quiet, stroking his hand through Will's hair repeatedly and trying his best to just be there. Just be there.

“Sometimes I wonder if she-if she knows. Eleanor I mean. If she can feel that there’s a piece of her missing. I know it’s sometimes a bit of an urban legend, about twins, but I saw it myself once. It’s a strange thing, but there’s a connection there; two little twined souls. And I know what it’s like, to have something pull at you day in and day out and know you’ll never be rid of it. I worry about her, because there’s so much that she doesn’t understand, doesn’t have to even think about yet, but one day she’ll know it. One day she’ll know that her sister is dead. One day she’ll know that he father is a murderer. And I don’t want to be the one to tell her. I don’t, selfish as that might be. I don’t want to be the one to tell her that the wonderful family I tried to build for her is full of nothing but ghosts.”

"Not ghosts," Jeff said desperately, pulling Will up to kiss his face, then his nose, then his lips; Will let him, hands pawing at his shoulders, "she's got you. She's got you."

"You're a good guy, Jeff," Will said against his throat, hiding the emotion there that threatened more, "you know that? You're a good guy."

"I know," he tried to joke.

"You're a good guy."

Curled together, Jeff wished he could be everything Will needed to stop the bleeding.

“What are we doing, Will? What are we doing?”

“I don’t know,” came the honest answer, breathed out, “I don’t know but it feels right.”

“Yeah, it does,” Jeff craned his head down to kiss Will’s curls, swallowing the lump of guilt and confusion until it hit his stomach like a stone, “it really does.”

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